

The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames¹

Reviewed by Major David C. Segraves*

“[Bob Ames] had this flair. He was an American Lawrence [of Arabia], a Lawrence with Stars and Stripes. He was making himself into a legend.”²

I. Introduction

On September 13, 1993, Israel and Palestine achieved a monumental milestone in the quest for peace.³ After signing a Declaration of Principles on Palestinian self-government in Gaza and the West Bank, the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasir Arafat, shook hands publicly.⁴ This meeting and the negotiation involving the United States was in no small part begun by a single Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent, Robert Ames, who had established a back channel to the PLO almost twenty-four years beforehand.⁵ As one of the CIA’s leading “Arabists” and a personal advisor to President Ronald Reagan on Middle East affairs, Robert Ames was a pivotal part of the United States’ efforts for peace in the region.⁶ Tragically, Ames was killed in the 1983 bombing of the United States embassy in Beirut, Lebanon.⁷

Anyone interested in the intelligence field, Middle East near history, the Arab-Israeli Conflict or the historical underpinnings of multiple terrorist groups should read *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames*. *The Good Spy* succeeds in superlatively informing the reader of these topics due to the credibility and access of the author; the details provided of Ames’ daily activities as a CIA agent, especially his relationships with those considered terrorists or despots; and the author’s research into those behind the bombing on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut.

II. Penetrating the Secrecy: Researching the Life of a Secret Agent

Kai Bird was uniquely qualified to explore and explain Robert Ames’ life. Since the CIA would not provide institutional assistance in the author’s research for the book, he had to rely on his background in investigative journalism.⁸ The author began his professional career as a freelance reporter in the Middle East and South Asia.⁹ Before turning to book writing, he served as an editor for *The Nation* where he wrote editorials and edited pieces that covered a number of events that are covered within the book.¹⁰ Bird’s traveling journalist experience paid dividends in researching and supporting the book. He traveled to multiple countries to interview sources including more than forty retired CIA or Mossad sources, including fifteen agents who allowed the use of their real names.¹¹

While the author’s professional beginnings provided his journalistic research ability, his upbringing helped him gain access to Robert Ames’ widow, Yvonne Ames.¹² Bird grew up all over the world as the son of a Foreign Service officer.¹³ While a young boy of 11-13, the author and his family were neighbors of the Ames while stationed in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ Yvonne Ames provided her perspective but also provided more than 150 pages of letters that her husband had written her which included details on his daily activities as a CIA agent.¹⁵ Finally, Bird found Mustafa Zein (Mustafa), a man who had acted as Robert Ames’ partner and access agent.¹⁶ Mustafa provided more than 100 pages of letters from Ames and had done his own research into discovering

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Marine Corps. Presently assigned as Staff Judge Advocate, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, Camp Pendleton, California. This book review was submitted in partial completion of the Master of Laws requirements of the 64th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course..

¹ KAI BIRD, *THE GOOD SPY: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ROBERT AMES* (2014).

² BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 240. This quote is praise received from Yoram Hessel, a senior Mossad officer. *Id.* Mossad is the Israeli equivalent to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), conducting espionage; covert paramilitary operations and other intelligence gathering. *About Us*, MOSSAD ISRAEL SECRET INTELLIGENCE SERV., <https://www.mossad.gov.il/eng/about/Pages/default.aspx> (last visited Oct. 20, 2016).

³ BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* at 2-4.

⁶ *Id.* at 4, 298, 319, 354.

⁷ *Id.* at 354.

⁸ *Id.* at xi.

⁹ Former Fellow Kai Bird, WILSON CENTER, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/person/kai-bird> (last visited Oct. 19, 2016).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Ron Hogan, *Kai Bird: The Spy Who Lived Next Door*, SHELF AWARENESS (Mar. 5, 2014), <http://www.shelfawareness.com/max-issue.html?issue=93#m189>.

¹² *Id.*; BIRD, *supra* note 1, at xi-xii.

¹³ *Id.* at xiii.

¹⁴ *Id.* at xii.

¹⁵ Politics and Prose, *Kai Bird “The Good Spy”*, YOUTUBE (May 28, 2014), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jD6jt9UCro>.

¹⁶ Hogan, *supra* note 11; BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 81.

who had been behind the Beirut embassy bombing.¹⁷ The author's exhaustive research and ability to piece together so many sources are truly the signs of a Pulitzer Prize winner.¹⁸

III. Becoming an Arabist

Through a number of decisions and interactions, the author showed how Ames became an Arabist for the CIA and learned to develop his own style of sources. As a young soldier stationed at Kagnew Station, an army listening post in Ethiopia, Ames first experienced the intelligence community and Arab culture.¹⁹ He eventually left the service and joined the CIA.²⁰ After graduating from "the farm," Ames received an assignment to the Near East Division and a posting in Dharhan, Saudi Arabia.²¹ Here, Ames embraced the Arab culture; after learning to track camels, Ames spent most of his free time visiting the Bedu.²² Ames learned the Bedu ways, their proverbs and their motivations.²³ The author showed how his interest in the Bedu allowed him to immerse himself into Arab culture but also provided him sources for Arab nationalist movements and other sources of possible unrest in Saudi Arabia.²⁴ His cultural knowledge allowed Ames to see through ignorant assessments of events.²⁵ The author illustrated this point telling the story of Ames disproving a CIA report that Russians were flying combat missions over Yemen.²⁶ The CIA report relied on accounts of a downed jet's pilot having "red" hair, but Ames discounted the report by informing the CIA that pilot was likely a Hajji who had made a pilgrimage to Mecca and dyed his hair red with henna as was the Arab custom.²⁷

¹⁷ *Author Debriefing: The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames*, SPYCAST (June 25, 2014) (downloaded using iTunes) [hereinafter *Author Debriefing: The Good Spy*].

¹⁸ Bob Thompson, *Arts Pulitzer's Make History the Big Winner*, WASHINGTON POST, (Apr. 18, 2006), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/17/AR2006041701774.html>.

¹⁹ BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 13, 16. A "listening post" is a location used for signals intelligence where they intercept and process communications. *Id.* at 13.

²⁰ *Id.* at 20.

²¹ *Id.* at 31, 33.

²² *Id.* at 43.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 45.

²⁵ *Id.* at 58.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 140 ("You sup with the devil . . . but you use a long spoon.").

²⁹ *Id.* at 348.

IV. Supping with the Devil: Relationships with "Bad Guys"²⁸

To gain information on organizations that are not allies, one must deal with "bad guys."²⁹ Bird illustrates Ames' understanding of this notion through three relationships. First, he detailed a quick visit to Muscat where Ames became a quick confidant of the Sultan's son, Qaboos.³⁰ After listening to Qaboos, Ames warned that Qaboos would overthrow his father; Qaboos staged a coup three years after the visit.³¹ The author further illustrated his point with a story of the relationship between Ames and Abd'al Fatah Ismail.³² While not friends, Ames listened to Ismail and learned about the Soviet influence in the Arab region.³³ The Soviets had taught Ismail that revolutions required twenty years.³⁴ The first step is to remove the young from their traditions establishing new schools to indoctrinate them.³⁵ Ismail did achieve his revolution and became the head of the Yemeni Socialist Party.³⁶ While the author did not uncover any actionable intelligence Ames had received from these "bad guys," these relationships provided a depth of understanding for the dynamics in the region. One could argue that the revolutionary plan enacted by Ismail has been used by radical Islam elements to recruit and that Ames may have seen the similar pattern if he had been alive.³⁷

No other relationship was more important or controversial for Ames than his friendship with Ali Hassan Salameh.³⁸ Salameh was close to Arafat and headed up the PLO's intelligence bureau, Force 17.³⁹ Through his access agent Mustafa Zein, Ames met and befriended Salameh.⁴⁰ Salameh provided a perfect foil for Ames with Ames a conservative family-man and Salameh a cosmopolitan playboy.⁴¹ Despite their differences, Ames and Salameh

³⁰ *Id.* at 59.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 64.

³³ *Id.* at 65.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 66.

³⁷ Mitchell Prothero, *U.S. Training Helped Mold Top Islamic State Military Commander*, MCCLATCHYDC (Sept 15, 2015), <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article35322882.html> (discussing how a new mosque was established by outside sources to spread the Daesh style of Islam to the young).

³⁸ BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 94.

³⁹ *Id.* at 83.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 91.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 94.

formed a back channel for the United States to covertly communicate with the PLO.

Just as Salameh attempted to use Ames to convince the United States to recognize the Palestinian need for independence, Ames worked to persuade Salameh that the PLO should move away from violent attacks and towards a political solution to their problems.⁴² The author follows the rollercoaster-ride relationship through Salameh being accused of involvement in the killing of Israeli athletes in Munich and through other CIA agents' insulting Salameh in their attempts to recruit Salameh by bribing him with money.⁴³ Ultimately, the author's treatment of this relationship substantially supports his theme that human intelligence, more specifically "the ability to form relationships with people who have good information will ultimately keep us safer in this world."⁴⁴

V. Those Behind the Bombing of the United States Embassy in Beirut

Detailing the twenty-four hours leading up to the bombing and the after effects through many perspectives, the author provides suspense and a very human dimension to the Beirut embassy bombing.⁴⁵ After providing a literary memorial to those lost in the bombing, the author turns his attention to the culpable parties.⁴⁶ While the author finds evidence of local terrorist involvement, Bird uncovered Iran's influence as had been established by a federal court.⁴⁷ The author tracked down Iran's influence specifically through Ali Reza Asgari, a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard at the time.⁴⁸ Through his sources and investigative journalism methods, the author has determined that Asgari defected to the United States in 2007 by providing intelligence on Iran's nuclear agenda.⁴⁹ The CIA has denied any involvement with Asgari's defection.⁵⁰ Bird has answered this denial, saying the CIA has to make a denial to preserve their ability to continue to support defections and answers that his book has 1,000 footnotes to back up his claims.⁵¹ While Bird acknowledges dealing with "bad guys" as exhibited by Ames' relationship with Salameh is a part of intelligence work, he questions whether it was the right choice to protect Asgari in this situation.⁵² Further, the author has openly questioned

whether current United States negotiations with Iran can reach a final settlement without addressing the civil judgments still existing against Iran.⁵³

VI. Conclusion

Throughout Robert Ames' life, Kia Bird has shined a light on the virtues and necessity of embracing other cultures. He has shown the necessity of using empathy when dealing with both allies, enemies and those in between. Those interested in the workings of the intelligence field, those interested in the history of the Middle East, or those who might find themselves operating in that region of the world, should read this book. With the author's one-thousand footnotes and more than 170 bibliographic entries peppered throughout the book, any reader should find this book as an excellent jumping off point into the study of Middle East politics. As the author himself has said, biography is the best form of history because it's the most accessible. The author can lay before the reader a wide range of topics without pretending to be all-encompassing because his lens is the life of one individual. By using Robert Ames' life, the author has made recent history in the Middle East, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict and the CIA's involvement in the region, more entertaining and accessible.⁵⁴

⁴² Politics and Prose, *supra* note 15.

⁴³ *All Things Considered: The Winding Stories of a Quintessential American Spy*, NAT'L PUB. RADIO (May 19, 2014), <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/19/313996762/the-winding-stories-of-a-quintessential-americanspy>.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 299-321.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 335.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 336; *see also* Dammarell v. Islamic Republic of Iran, 281 F.Supp.2d 105 (D.D.C. 2003).

⁴⁸ BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 342.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 344-47.

⁵⁰ Jeff Stein, *Top Iran Terrorist Under CIA Protection in U.S., Book Says*, NEWSWEEK (May 19, 2004), <http://www.newsweek.com/top-iran-terrorist-under-cia-protection-us-book-says-251378>.

⁵¹ *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*, CNN (May 20, 2014), http://situationroom.blogs.cnn.com/2014/05/20/author-iranian-terrorist-living-in-us/?hpt=sr_mid.

⁵² BIRD, *supra* note 1, at 344-48.

⁵³ Kai Bird, *The Ghosts That Haunt an Iran Accord*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 28, 2015) http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/opinion/the-ghosts-that-haunt-an-iran-accord.html?_r=0.

⁵⁴ *Author Debriefing: The Good Spy*, *supra* note 17.