

Kai Bird

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

David Taylor:

Hello, this is David Taylor at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time this year. It will also be in a new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center here in Washington, D.C. The book festival's hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. And for more details, please visit our website, which is at www.loc.gov/bookfest -- that's B-O-O-K-F-E-S-T. And now it's my pleasure to introduce Kai Bird, whose latest book is titled, 'The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames.' Mr. Bird's previous work includes outstanding books about John Jay McCloy, George and William Bundy, and Jay Robert Oppenheimer. The Oppenheimer book, titled 'American Prometheus,' won a Pulitzer Prize. Kai Bird, thank you for joining us today.

Kai Bird:

Hello, David. It's terrific to be with you.

David Taylor:

Here's a fundamental first question: who was Robert Ames?

Kai Bird:

Bob Ames -- Robert Ames was a CIA officer, a clandestine officer from 1960 until he was killed in Beirut in 1983, and he was, as my book is entitled, the good spy. He was actually a very decent, good human being, and actually a very good spy at his work.

David Taylor:

Now I understand from reading your book you had a personal connection to Ames. Could you tell us about that?

Kai Bird:

Yes, I have a very vivid childhood memories of him when I was 11, 12, and 13 years old; he was our next door neighbor. And this was in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where my father was a Foreign Service officer posted there, and we were living on a very windswept desert compound with only about 20 houses on it. And Bob Ames was next door, was our neighbor. I didn't know he was a CIA officer at the time, but my father later told me this. And so I have vivid memories of this very tall, handsome 6'3" guy, who was in his late twenties, and who loved to play basketball across the street with the local Marine squad that guarded the compound.

David Taylor:

Was his family with him at that time?

Kai Bird:

Oh yes, he had his wife Yvonne and two young babies, girls at the time; he later had six children altogether. But I knew Yvonne, who was a very pretty blonde woman, who looked like Lee Vulman [spelled phonetically], and you know, they were just a very pleasant couple in this very exotic, strange locale, Saudi Arabia.

David Taylor:

What is it that motivated you to write this particular book?

Kai Bird:

Well, many years later, of course, I read in the newspapers about the terrible truck bomb that plowed into the U.S. embassy in Beirut on April 18th, 1983, and killed Bob Ames and seven other CIA officers, wiping out the whole CIA station, but also killing a total of 17 Americans and 46 Lebanese. You know, it was the first big truck bomb attack on a U.S. embassy abroad, and I remember this -- reading about his tragic death, and you know, wondering what had happened to him, and how this truck bomb had -- you know, who was behind it. So, that was initially the idea, was to do an investigation of the attack on the Beirut embassy bombing, which is a largely forgotten episode. Most Americans remember the attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon, which happened six months later, but the embassy is sort of a forgotten prelude to this terrible attack on a Marine barracks.

David Taylor:

Tell us about how you went about the research and writing that you did for this book.

Kai Bird:

Well, initially I just thought I would be going to start out -- I was going to do a book about the embassy bombing. And as I got into it, I, you know, was able to contact Robert Ames' widow, Yvonne, who lives in a small town in North Carolina. And I went and interviewed her, and she showed me the family scrapbook, and eventually she showed me letters that Bob Ames had written to her over the years. And then I began contacting a number of his colleagues, and you know, while I -- initially, I didn't think I could do a full-blown biography of a CIA officer, because, you know, everything is classified, eventually I realized that there were all sorts of Ames' former colleagues who were eager to talk.

They had fond memories of this man, and thought he had died tragically, and was sort of a legendary CIA officer, and they wanted his story told. So, they began sort of talking to me willy-nilly without regard to these 30- and 40-year-old secrets. And so the more they talked, the more I realized that I could indeed do a full-blown biography. And in the end, I guess I talked to more than 40 CIA officers, and most -- all -- almost all of them retired, and four Mossad, Israeli Mossad spies, who were also retired, who had known Ames and dealt with him over the years. And I found very few documents as such, so the book was mostly done through interview, but it was a lot of fun to talk to these old retired spies, and the book, I think, shows how much fun I had writing it.

David Taylor:

Tell us more about that. What was fun about it?

Kai Bird:

Well, these old guys -- some women, actually -- had led fascinating careers, and they wanted these stories told. They're at a point in their lives -- they're often in their 70's and 80's -- where they wanted to tell their story. And you know, what emerges is sort of a much more realistic picture of what it's like to be a CIA officer. You know, Bob Ames was not a -- he was no James Bond. He did indeed have to carry a pistol in his belt occasionally in dangerous places, like Aden when it was going through a revolution, and Beirut during the civil war, but he hated guns. He was a man who actually had very few enemies, and he was a man who understood the Middle East, and he was good at his job precisely because he was very empathetic to Arab culture, and generally to people.

He wanted to understand their stories, and so he studied Arabic and became fluent in it. He could read a newspaper; he could carry on a conversation in Arabic on politics, which is, you know, very unusual, even today for a clandestine CIA officer; there are really just a handful who are capable of doing this today. And so in the 1970's and 80's it was very rare as well. Anyway, he was good at his job, and I learned that being a spy is about human empathy, and about the ability to listen and be empathetic to the plight of other people, often in a very dangerous neighborhood, like the Middle East.

David Taylor:

Is that one of the principal messages that you're hoping that people will come away with after reading your book?

Kai Bird:

Yeah, I want them to understand through the life and career of Robert Ames that human intelligence, as opposed to signal intelligence, intercept intelligence, is just as valuable, if not more valuable than all these intercepts as such. You know, we, within recent years, of course in the news, we've been reading about the NSA, and Edward Snowden, and wiretaps, and the NSA's ability to intercept e-mails and telephone conversations, but I think if you read 'The Good Spy' you'll come away with many sort of second thoughts about all -- the value of all that in the absence of human intelligence, where you have actually people on the ground trying to understand motivation and intentions. And you know, you can't find out human motivations and intentions through intercept intelligence. You have to sit down over a cup of coffee, or a beer, or a hookah pipe, and listen to people and try to understand what makes them tick.

And Robert Ames was very good at that, and I believe that if something like the CIA has a role to play, it's not in the role -- not in the field of paramilitary intelligence, which is better left to the military. It's a -- their role is to go where diplomats, Foreign Service officers cannot go. So they, you know, they go into dangerous neighborhoods as such, and they get to know people who are troubled, and also sometimes form relationships with people who are dangerous -- terrorists. I mean, Bob Ames ended up hanging out with someone like Ali Hassan Salameh, who was Yasser Arafat's right-hand man, his intelligence chief, his chief bodyguard at one point.

This Salameh was a young man in his late twenties, he wore a gun, he was associated with Black September, and perhaps the tragedy in Munich where 11 Israeli athletes were killed. And yet Ames, through his relationship with Salameh, was able to influence the PLO and Arafat into thinking about laying down the gun and talking about a political solution to the Palestinian aspirations. And so in a certain sense he helped to plant the seeds of the peace process, what came into fruition in Oslo, and yet is now still stymied. But everyone in the CIA that I talked to regarded Robert Ames as the man who had planted the seed of the process where he got the Palestinians to talk to the Americans, and eventually the Palestinians into a relationship, a conversation with the Israelis, and that's the beginning of the peace process.

David Taylor:

You talked about Salameh, who's clearly a leading character in your book. Another person who emerges is Mustafa Zein. Can you tell us about him?

Kai Bird:

Mustafa is a great character. Mustafa Zein was not an agent; he never accepted a dime from the U.S. government or the CIA, but had, as a young Lebanese teenager, he had come to America on an exchange program, and spent his senior year in high school in a small town in Illinois. And he fell in love with all things American, and when he was back in the Middle East he eventually befriended Robert Ames, and you know, they were sort of an unlikely pair, but Salameh saw an -- I'm sorry, Mustafa Zein and his friend Ali Hassan Salameh, the PLO intelligence chief, saw an opportunity with their relationship through Robert Ames to cultivate the -- a sort of back channel to Washington to the American government.

And that was -- that began to happen as early as 1969, and so Mustafa Zein set up the initial contact, and sort of helped Ames to cultivate this relationship with Ali Hassan Salameh, who was initially, probably, and at least in Ames' mind, a target for recruitment; that's what CIA clandestine officers sometimes tried to do, is to recruit people. But Ames quickly realized that someone like Salameh was un-recruit-able, was unwilling to take money or sign a contract, but that he was a man who was willing to form a back channel, who was willing to exchange information, and this became a very important back channel from about 1969 to 1979, until one day in Beirut in January of '79, Ali Hassan Salameh was killed by a car bomb triggered by a Mossad agent.

David Taylor:

Now, speaking of back channels, one of the surprises of your book, or a surprise to me certainly, has to do with the U.S. back channel to the PLO. Can you tell us a little more about Bob Ames' role in that?

Kai Bird:

Well, as I said, it began in 1969 at a time when Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's national security advisor, had promised the Israelis that the U.S. government would have no relationship with the PLO, which the Israelis and the Americans regarded as a terrorist organization. But the PLO in 1969, as early as 1969, was a major player in things Middle Eastern, and if U.S. diplomats couldn't talk to people in the PLO and the

Palestinian community, that was actually exactly what CIA officers should be doing. So Ames actually created this back channel by meeting with Ali Hassan Salameh through Mustafa Zein, his sort of sidekick at the time, in a café in Beirut, and developed a relationship.

And it became very important to the U.S. government, particularly as the Beirut, Lebanon Civil War began, and Salameh and the PLO through this relationship with Ames gave security guarantees to the Americans living in Beirut, and protected the U.S. embassy in the midst of a civil war. And also the relationship was used to exchange information about other terrorists that were enemies of both Arafat and the United States, people like Abu Nidal, a sort of Palestinian-Iraqi renegade, and they prevented some terrorist incidents from happening through the use of this back channel, through the use of this intelligence that came from Salameh.

David Taylor:

Now your book 'The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames' has been out for a little while. What's been the response to it so far?

Kai Bird:

I've gotten terrific reviews in The New York Times, and The Washington Post, and the London Spectator, and the London Sunday Times, and the Dallas Morning Herald, and I've been interviewed on the Charlie Rose Show, and the Wolf Blitzer CNN Show, and All Things Considered; it's a really quite extraordinary. I guess people love a good spy story, and in this instance it's a spy story, but a true one; so it's not a novel, and it makes it all the more intriguing to people. And I think I was, you know, really quite fortunate to be able to uncover as many as old 30 and 40-year-old secrets as I could, not that anything I reveal is -- I don't think there's anything I reveal is damaging to national security by any definition, these are old secrets, and yet they're secrets we should now know about. It's really critical to understand the Middle East, to know that the history of the relationship between the CIA and the PLO going back 40 years, and that helps us to have an understanding of our current dilemmas in this troubled region of the world.

David Taylor:

Well, I think we'll end on that perfect note, and I want to thank you, Kai Bird, very much for being with us, and we look forward to seeing you on Saturday August 30th in the History and Biography Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center, here in Washington to hear more stories about this book, and other observations of your life as a writer. Thank you.

Kai Bird:

Thank you. I look forward to it; the festival is one of my favorite events.

David Taylor:

See you then.

Female Speaker:

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress visit us --

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