



America's Great Game: The CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East

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From the 9/11 attacks to waterboarding to drone strikes, relations between the United States and the Middle East seem caught in a downward spiral. And all too often, the Central Intelligence Agency has made the situation worse. But this crisis was not a historical inevitability—far from it. Indeed, the earliest generation of CIA operatives was actually the region's staunchest western ally.

In *America's Great Game*, celebrated intelligence historian Hugh Wilford reveals the surprising history of the CIA's pro-Arab operations in the 1940s and 50s by tracing the work of the agency's three most influential—and colorful—officers in the Middle East. Kermit "Kim" Roosevelt was the grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and the first head of CIA covert action in the region; his cousin, Archie Roosevelt, was a Middle East scholar and chief of the Beirut station. The two Roosevelts joined combined forces with Miles Copeland, a maverick covert operations specialist who had joined the American intelligence establishment during World War II. With their deep knowledge of Middle Eastern affairs, the three men were heirs to an American missionary tradition that engaged Arabs and Muslims with respect and empathy. Yet they were also fascinated by imperial intrigue, and were eager to play a modern rematch of the "Great Game," the nineteenth-century struggle between Britain and Russia for control over central Asia. Despite their good intentions, these "Arabists" propped up authoritarian regimes, attempted secretly to sway public opinion in America against support for the new state of Israel, and staged coups that irrevocably destabilized the nations with which they empathized. Their efforts, and ultimate failure, would shape the course of U.S. Middle Eastern relations for decades to come.

Based on a vast array of declassified government records, private papers, and personal interviews, *America's Great Game* tells the riveting story of the merry band of CIA officers whose spy games forever changed U.S. foreign policy.

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Lynn says

Interesting book about American Arabists who sought to make policy in the United States for Arab countries, Iran and Israel. Kim Roosevelt is the primary personage in this book. As a grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, he led a charmed life and as boy, was infatuated with the novel Kim by Rudyard Kipling. He always aspired to be an Orientalist and got a chance to work in the newly formed CIA after WWII. He grew up in the Republican wing of the Roosevelt family and mainly served under the Eisenhower administration. As a Arabist for the CIA, he tried to lead with others, a more moderate path to Arab policy and temper US support of Israel with pragmatism. He had clashes with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles who saw most of the world as a nation was either with the US or with the Soviet Union with muted success. Before the Americans had moved in, the British Empire controlled vast swaths of Arab and Iranian policy and the US ended up following Britain's lead and cooperating with its M17 spy agency. The US therefore copied many of British imperial policies. The crowning achievement was the overthrow of the Iranian government in the 50s and the installation of the Shah as the head. Later Kim would try to write a book about this wonderful achievement and try to publish it in 1979 when the Shah had no desire to be seen as a dupe for the US, the British were desperate not to get credit for their part, and a revolution in 1980 caused critics to point out that America's manipulation in Iranian politics had full circle into a crisis outside of American control. A very good book.

Terin says

I think this book should be required reading by anyone wishing to either comment on, participate in, or insist on U.S. participation in the ongoing revolutions/sectarian warfare/attempted exploitation of natural resources for our own selfish interests.

One of the best things I got out of it, after reading through to the 1960s, was this, about highly-decorated Marine veteran of WWI, WWII and the CIA, William "Bill" Eddy http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_...

'Significantly, though, the loudest local voice cautioning against military action belonged to the old Arabist William Eddy, who had moved from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon several years earlier to help run ARAMCO's TAPline and was now living out his retirement in his country of birth. "Armed intervention by the Western Allies in the civil strife in Lebanon would be a catastrophe to American interests," he told McClintock. As a Maronite Christian, Chamoun was not representative of Lebanon's population, Eddy explained; for that matter, he was not even representative of the Maronite community, whose patriarch was trying to live in peace with the Muslim majority (this is an echo of Eddy's earlier interest in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue). Military support for the president would, therefore, be tantamount to "an act of aggression against at least half of the population," invoke memories of earlier colonial depredations, and even invite comparison with the Soviet Union's treatment of "captive nations." Moreover, Eddy continued, it would place Western troops in unnecessary danger, as the experience of the British in Palestine and the French in Algeria showed that occupying armies "are powerless to stem a spreading wave of violence and hate for the invaders."

Joe Xtarr says

I thoroughly enjoyed the contents of this book. Some of the Arab names and run-on sentences had me backtracking a little which broke my reading rhythm a bit. I should have prepared a map of the middle east to refer to while following along; prior to this book, I had limited knowledge of post-WWII middle eastern history, which forced me to remember names and places instead of being able to acknowledge them and move on. That being said, the author does a decent job of keeping a nice progressive pace throughout this entire work.

Ryan C La Fleur says

As I finish this book today, forces backed by the United States have announced they are heading toward the erstwhile capital of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. At the same time forces from Russia, the former Soviet Union, are also engaged in attempting to take what was once the second largest city in Syria from the various rebel factions in the country and Turkey is poised to invade even further into the Syria.

Across the Middle East turmoil still rages from what was once touted as the Arab Spring. A time that was supposed to relieve the people living in the region from despotism and bring democracy and self rule to this expanse of the world. Instead, uncertainty remains in most, terror and war in many more countries. I find it fitting to finish a history of Americas first fumbling steps in the region after taking up the mantle of the most powerful country in the world and the beacon of the free world.

The parallels from what is happening now to what occurred following World War 2 is remarkable. Hugh Wilford does a fine job of explaining the protagonist and antagonist at the heart of Americas attempt to relieve the Arab world of the oppression of colonialism and the new Cold War era. The good intentions and the mistakes made in pursuit of noble goals faulty carried out. While not quite as eloquent as Ben McIntyre and his histories of the World War 2 era, Wilford's prose is strong and easy to read.

Natalie says

I'm not sure what I make of the book. In some places I couldn't put it down; in others, I wasn't so sure I was going to finish. The author jumps around a lot - I think it would have been better told in a more story-like fashion (Scott Anderson's Lawrence in Arabia does a good job of this) versus "this happened, that happened" etc. Overall the book had a lot of interesting points and I did like it.

Jerome says

An interesting, well-written and comprehensive work.

Wilford begins with the cultural and educational nature of America's early Middle Eastern influence, and how it evolved after European power in the region declined after World War II, and how the OSS operated in the region during the war. As the CIA is formed, Wilford looks at the Agency's activities there (up to the

Kennedy era), mostly through officers Kermit Roosevelt (“the last person that you would expect to be up to the neck in dirty tricks,” according to Kim Philby), his cousin Archibald Roosevelt, and Miles Copeland, as well as their often romanticized and sentimental view of the situation.

Wilford also describes how US policy was initially based around promoting Arab democracy and nationalism and reducing Europe’s influence, then shifted to supporting pro-Western governments and anti-Communist movements. He also writes how it was in this era that Americans in the Middle East began to be viewed as “spies” rather than “missionaries, doctors and professors.” Wilford also describes the anti-Zionism of the CIA’s Arabists, how they promoted the Arab position, and how they were done in by an ultimately more effective pro-Zionist counter-movement.

The narrative is engaging and readable and the book doesn’t have many problems. It does, however, suggest that a straight line of causation can be drawn between the 1953 Iran coup and the 1979 Revolution. Many people have made this claim, but Wilford doesn’t make it any more convincing. Also, the story of the Mossadegh coups is mostly told through Roosevelt; there is little on other officers involved. There is little material on the Suez Crisis. Reading the book you often get the impression that CIA was making a lot of these decisions on their own authority, and there is not always sufficient discussion of the policies made in Washington. Wilford spends some time on “American Friends of the Middle East,” a domestic CIA front meant to counter Zionism and American sympathy for Israel, but this initiative did not have much impact, so it does seem like Wilford gives it a little too much attention at times. Also, most of Wilford’s research is based on US and British works, and Wilford was unfortunately, unable to get access to Agency files from the era.

A critical but balanced, well-researched and astute work.

Yunis Esa says

I enjoyed the book very much. It was my first glimpse of the Arabist. This book is a look at the first CIA operators in the Middle East. They made alliances and change the Middle East forever and in their short period of time. whether they did get or harm is not the point, the point is to try to understand why they did what they did, and why they chose the sides they did

Mike says

This is a great book, an engrossing story that explains history of the mid 20th century through the people who lived it - in the case one of the fabled American patrician families of the time, the Oyster Bay Roosevelts. It is the tale of two grandsons of Teddy Roosevelt and their part in the Middle East disaster the unfolded after WWII.

If you always wondered exactly how the US got sucked into the tar pit of the Levant you can blame the British, and Eisenhower, and the Dulles brothers - who all feature in this sordid telling of a historical train wreck that still is happening today. The circus of Syria and Russia and America playing under the big top starts here, as does the Israel-Palestine swamp and the recent military coup in Egypt. Did you know that BP, British Petroleum, was originally the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)? The show that never ends...

The author has put together many threads that were not connected before, and not just the usual retelling of other American history books over and over, as is the case for many tomes about Jefferson or Washington or the Civil War. This one is more like a movie put together from the grainy black & white films from family archives that were shot at the time and have been waiting to be found in dusty attics.

It is very much worth a read.

Alex Linschoten says

An excellent account of the early years of the CIA's involvement in the Middle East, with the agency populated by a group of anti-Zionist Arabists. This included Kim Roosevelt (of the Iran coup fame), Miles Copeland and Archie Roosevelt, all of whom are the lead characters. This is a heavily-researched book, written in an engaging manner.

Todd Plesco says

Relatively little has been written about CIA operations in the 1940's and 50's. Hugh Wilford's AMERICA'S GREAT GAME draws on personal interviews, papers, and recently declassified material of former operatives and their associates. The book is centered on the continuation by CIA of the 19th century's joust by British and Russian agents for control of Central Asia. It delves into the intrigue of the loss of support for Arab nationalists like Nasser. In the book, there are rich anecdotes and the unbelievably larger-than-life three leading CIA pro-Arabists in search of Lawrence of Arabia styled romantic adventure, Miles Copeland, and the Roosevelt cousins Kermit "Kim" Jr and Archie – both grandsons of Theodore Roosevelt.

Kim Roosevelt was the first head of CIA covert action in the Middle East. He also masterminded the 1953 coup operation in Iran which toppled nationalist prime minister Mohammed Mosaddeq which restored power to the Shah. Wilford described Kim as having had clouded judgment of Persian politics which encouraged his tendency to view Iran as a place for personal adventure and playing spy games. Such an attitude is attributed to his identity as "a Roosevelt man" and his comparisons of his work to his father and grandfathers' writing on their hunting expeditions.

Kim's cousin Archie was a Middle East scholar and the chief of CIA's Istanbul station. The cousins are referred to as the Oyster Bay Roosevelts – a tight knit family with common interests, tastes, and sense of humor. Archie worked at the Office of War Information headquarters in Washington, DC developing ideas for propaganda in the Arab world. His formative years provided him the opportunity to witness the odds between the Protestant New England missionaries of Beirut at odds with the Catholic Maronites of the French which led to the division of Greater Syria after WWI. In WWII North Africa, France's reputation grew worse with Vichy officials being allowed to remain in office even after the Allied invasion.

Miles Copeland was a covert action expert who joined the intelligence establishment during WWII. Copeland is quoted as saying "Both leaders and doers in a given society play three games at the same time...the personal, the domestic, the international – and sometimes a fourth, the bureaucratic."

John Foster Dulles is described by Miles as having resorted to Allen Dulles' crypto-diplomacy through Miles

and Kim Rossevelt (the chief crypto-diplomat): “When someone had to hop on an aeroplane and go to Iran, Egypt, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia to talk to the Shah, Nasser, King Hussein or King Saud, the Dulles brothers would think of either Kim or myself, sometimes together, sometimes singly, and sometimes in the company of some professional VIP”. Wilford explains that crypto-diplomacy allowed for non-public conversation leading to breakthroughs such as the Suez base agreement of 1954. Conversely, the book explains that the crypto-diplomacy bred suspicion in the minds of foreign heads of state which also undermined and embarrassed the effectiveness of individuals like Ambassador Henry Byroade.

The book expands on early 1950's CIA's manipulation of Middle Eastern governments and the inconsistency of American involvement and support for the then emerging Arab nationalist movement

Wilford's book eventually demonstrates that it was American support for Israel which ultimately destroyed the Arabists' influence both within CIA and America.

Hugh Wilford is a history professor at California State University Long Beach and author of four books which include *The Mighty Wurlitzer*. If you are interested in the development of the Levant, early American Middle East politics, or the emergence of American intelligence in Central Asia, this book will be hard to put down once you get started.

KOMET says

A little more than a week ago, I was watching CSPAN's BookTV, which featured the author Hugh Wilford speaking about this book. The subject matter --- which focused on the efforts of the CIA to shape and influence events in the Middle East from its inception in 1947 to the late 1950s --- I had, until then, knew nothing about. (The 1953 coup in Iran which deposed the popularly elected Mohammed Mossadegh and restored the Shah to power, I did know something about from years ago. But I didn't give it any further thought.) But I was so thoroughly impressed with Wilford's presentation that I bought the book the very next day.

The book begins by providing some background on the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, which goes back to the mid-1800s, when a number of Protestant groups travelled there to evangelize and establish cultural and educational institutions, such as the American University of Beirut, which was founded in 1866. Indeed, until the late 1930s, the full extent of American involvement in the Middle East was cultural and of a disinterested nature. Deep links had been established with the Arabs, who, during those years, constituted the majority population of the region.

The coming of the Second World War and - after November 1942 (when U.S. forces embarked upon Operation Torch and landed in North Africa to help defeat Italo-German forces there) - the growing U.S. military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East, inclusive of the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), would fill a postwar vacuum in the region due to the decline of British and French imperial power there.

To illustrate the burgeoning U.S. economic, military, and diplomatic muscle in the Middle East during the 1940s, Wilford shares with the reader the personal histories of the 3 men who played key roles in the CIA in the region during the first decade of its existence. They were: Kermit "Kim" Roosevelt; Archibald "Archie" Roosevelt (both cousins and grandsons of former President Theodore Roosevelt); and Miles Copeland (a Southerner who arose from humble origins to become one of the most skilled and accomplished CIA

operatives in the Middle East). Each man possessed unique talents (Archie Roosevelt was a scholar of Arab culture and spoke several languages) and occupied center stage in the efforts of the Eisenhower Administration to forge a secure American sphere of influence in the Middle East.

Considering the muddled state of affairs in the Middle East today, reading this book offered me a better understanding as to why things got that way over time. Both Roosevelts were Arabists, representative of a group of Americans who, prior to the Second World War, spent most of their lives in the Middle East, studying it, and fully immersing themselves in its culture.

In the early years of the CIA involvement in the Middle East, U.S. policy was directed more toward promoting Arab democratic aspirations and removing all vestiges of European colonial power and influence in the region. Yet, though this was the avowed aim, it was soon replaced under Cold War pressures by the overriding imperative of the Eisenhower Administration to keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East. This resulted in policies supporting pro-Western conservative/reactionary governments in the region and a departure from an earlier policy, which was supportive of Arab nationalist movements, as represented by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. Indeed, the U.S. tried to make Nasser the key element in shaping a Middle East to their liking. But Nasser, who was genuinely interested in improving the welfare of his people, was unwilling to become compromised by Washington. At the same time, the book points out the growth and importance played during the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations by several CIA-fronted organizations in the U.S. (e.g., the American Friends of the Middle East (AFME)) that sought to promote pro-Arab sentiment among the general public as a way of creating more impartial Middle East policies from Washington. But, their effort ultimately proved futile for a host of reasons. In particular, the growing power of the Jewish (pro-Zionist) lobby, who did a much better job of promoting their interests than the Arabists.

In summing up this review, I like to cite the following remarks from this book, which further illustrate why the U.S. is not widely regarded as an honest broker in the Middle East today.

“A combination of adverse factors --- Arab resistance, British duplicity, and the contradictions inherent in the American strategy itself --- would frustrate not only the CIA’s plan for a coup in Syria but also the other objectives outlined in Francis Russell’s crucial paper of August 4, 1956: the forging of an Arab front against revolutionary Egypt and the elimination of Nasser as a force in Middle Eastern politics.” --- p. 252.

“There were several reasons why Washington objected so strongly to the Suez Crisis: its potentially calamitous consequences for the Western position in the Middle East and the rest of the Third World; the fact that it distracted international attention from the Soviets’ brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising, which was unfolding at exactly the same time; and its no less unfortunate timing on the eve of a US presidential election. Perhaps the most deeply felt American grievance, though, was the element of deception involved. The British had been secretly planning this operation for weeks while talking to their American cousins about other measures for dealing with Nasser. So much, then, for the Special Relationship.” --- p. 259.

"Kim Roosevelt and his fellow Arabists had come to the Cold War Middle East hoping not only to prevent the Russians from taking it over but also to help the Arabs throw off the colonial domination of the French and British. The Suez crisis had seemed to mark a historic moment of opportunity for the Arabist vision, with the United States briefly emerging as the champion of Arab independence from European imperialism. It took less than a year, however, for that promise to be squandered. Thanks to a combination of [John] Foster Dulles' s [President Eisenhower's Secretary of State] rigid worldview and subtle pressure from both the British and conservative Arab leaders, the Eisenhower administration came down decisively on the side

of the old imperial order --- and, ironically, the CIA became the main instrument of the new antinationalist policy. The Arabists did not even have the consolation of pulling off some spectacular coup, as they had in 1953.

Indeed, the main effect of repeated attempts at regime change in Syria was to drive that country further into the arms of the communists." --- p. 276.

For anyone wanting to have a better understanding of postwar Middle East history, he/she will do him/herself a great service by reading this book.

Phil says

Highly detailed, Wilford charts the course of several key individuals (e.g. the Roosevelt cousins, Archie and Kim) who were key players in the 1940s and 1950s, who attempted (and ultimately failed) to create a strong American presence in the Arab states of the Eastern Mediterranean, filling the "void" that had been the British and French colonial hegemony in the area.

The book has special meaning for me. I studied Arabic at Georgetown, Columbia, and U. Michigan, from the early 1960 into the 1970s. Many of the instructors and senior graduate students I encountered had had ties to the main characters mentioned by Wilford, and many of their attitudes and prejudices were carried forward.

The "basic story" was known to me as a result of my studies, but now I had access to footnoted (documented) facts, rather than half-baked reminiscences and hear-say.

It is a story, in the words of Miles Copeland, a major player, where "[t]here are neither winners nor losers - only survivors."

Tanya says

Loved this book because it put my dad's work in the Middle East into much clearer context. Besides, how often does your father get quoted and acknowledged in a book?

It started out strong and seemed very well organized, but I wish he would have provided the kind of details about the sixties that he had for the fifties. Perhaps he's planning a sequel when more CIA documents get declassified.

Silvio111 says

I am not going to have time to finish this book so I sent it back to the library. However, just want to note that with Ken Burns' new documentary about the Roosevelts starting on PBS this week, this book is a tie in, because it deals with two Roosevelt cousins: one from FDR's Hyde Park branch, and one from Eleanor's Oyster Bay side.

Every time I read a book about spies (or the roots of the OSS/CIA,) it always appears that these operatives spend their time drifting about, cultivating social connections in world trouble spots. Their job descriptions seem quite vague.

Nonetheless, this book is quite interesting, although of course, it is all about men. (The wives are left back in the US to run the home and raise the kids, and probably spend about one week a year, if lucky, with their spouses.

Aaron says

Per FTC regulations, I received this book via the GoodReads First Reads giveaway promotion.

It was hard to read this book and not come away disappointed and aggravated. Not because it isn't a good book, but because the United States' meddlesome nature in the service of being anti-communist is just ridiculous. Can you imagine the Middle East if we had just left well enough alone? Maybe it would be in better shape, maybe it wouldn't...but we'll never know. Hugh Wilford has taken on a huge challenge in writing about this period in history, not least of which because of the sheer number of interesting characters. Starting with two grandsons of Teddy Roosevelt and encompassing an ever-rotating collection of presidents, directors, prime ministers, and the like, the character list in this book is baffling. That's part of the reason it gets less stars. By the end of the book, you've forgotten who is who and what they're trying to accomplish. It's maddening. I suppose that's the point, but I'd much rather follow one or two individuals than try to know everybody and what their goals were. Still and all, a decent book, much better than Wilford's "The Mighty Wurlitzer" (that I never finished), in my opinion. And, if you're at all interested in this area of the world, and the historical background of the CIA in relation to this area, definitely a good read.
