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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'America's Great Game,' by Hugh Wilford

In 1951, the CIA created a front group to promote an anti-Zionist view of the Middle East and weaken American support for Israel.

By **MICHAEL DORAN**

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Kim Philby, the British turncoat who spied for the Soviet Union, described Kermit Roosevelt as "a courteous, soft-spoken Easterner with impeccable social connections, well-educated rather than intellectual, pleasant and unassuming as host and guest." Theodore Roosevelt's grandson, Philby thought, was "the last person that you would expect to be up to the neck in dirty tricks."

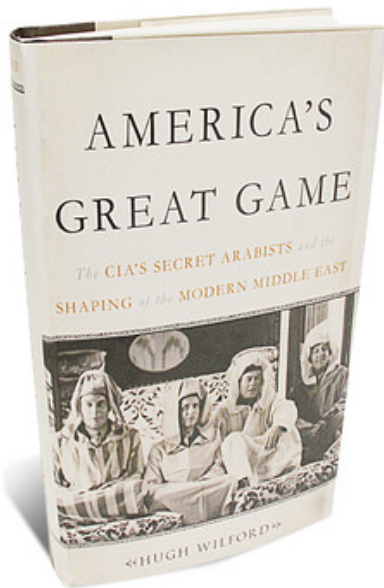
Roosevelt, who headed the CIA's Middle East division in the Eisenhower administration, is best remembered today for engineering the coup that toppled Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. But in "America's Great Game," Hugh Wilford reminds us that Roosevelt was also deeply involved in the Arab world. Indeed, he was the agency's foremost "Arabist." The term usually refers to State Department regional experts who were the intellectual, and often biological, descendants of American missionaries in the Arab lands. These officials were fiercely anti-Zionist, convinced that American support for Israel was a strategic blunder of the first order. This was because, as Mr. Wilford writes, they believed "in the overriding importance of American-Arab, and Christian-Muslim, relations."

The book examines the role of CIA Arabists by tracing the careers of Roosevelt and two of his comrades: his cousin Archie and Miles Copeland, an Alabama jazz musician who, like many in the early CIA,

wound up at the agency through his work in its wartime precursor, the Office of Strategic Services.

The author, a historian at California State University, Long Beach, makes deft use of declassified government documents. He also draws on the personal papers and memoirs of CIA agents and their associates, sources that until now have remained almost entirely untapped. We learn, for example, that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles often ran important diplomatic missions through Roosevelt rather than normal State Department channels. But the most important of the Arabists' efforts was the attempt, in Eisenhower's first term, to turn Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's charismatic strongman, into a strategic partner—a gambit that failed miserably.

In addition to analytical rigor, Mr. Wilford has an eye for a good story. It helps that his characters were larger-than-life figures. Kermit—or "Kim," as he was known—is at the center of the drama, and his personality is captured in all of its complexity. The portrait of Archie is less well-developed, mainly because he was more tight-lipped than his cousin. The two learned early that, as grandsons of Teddy, they were expected to take the world by storm. Kim's upbringing, especially, was modeled on aristocratic life in Victorian Britain. His time as an adult, he was led to believe, would be split between writing, exploration, big-game hunting and national service.



By the time the two cousins were ready to strike out on their own, however, the family fortune had dwindled. Even with money, living up to the Roosevelt name was hard. Without money, it was nearly impossible. The CIA was an elegant escape from this dilemma, offering a career that combined adventure, travel and service to country—all on the salary of a government bureaucrat.

Miles Copeland, the third subject of the book, came from a very different world. Nothing in his career prior to his wartime service had

prepared him for the central role he would play in American-Arab affairs or the close relations he would develop with the patrician

 AMERICA'S GREAT GAME

By Hugh Wilford

(Basic, 342 pages, \$29.99)

Roosevelts. In bringing his character to life, Mr. Wilford is aided by Copeland's garrulousness. His two memoirs are probably the most revealing

first-person accounts ever penned by an American covert operator.

Copeland was a full-time self-promoter, and he never let the truth get in the way of a good yarn. His first posting to the Middle East was in Syria in 1949, where he worked closely with Archie, who was then working out of Beirut. Whereas Archie, the more punctilious of the two, put together a network of agents and studiously collected reports, Copeland flew by the seat of his pants. When Archie accused him of fabricating reports to Washington, Copeland didn't deny it. "What's the difference between my fabricating reports and your letting your agents do it?" Copeland retorted. "At least mine make sense."

The Middle East in the 1950s offered surprising opportunities for such men. Kim was, for instance, the motive force behind the 1951 founding of the American Friends of the Middle East. Seemingly a private outfit dedicated to citizen diplomacy, it was actually a CIA front that sought to weaken support for the Jewish state in the U.S. You read that right: The CIA created an early counterbalance to the pro-Israel lobby, promoting an anti-Zionist reading of the region until 1967, when the radical magazine *Ramparts* exposed agency funding to domestic organizations.

The Roosevelt cousins, Copeland and other leading Arabists believed that a century of American missionary activity had paved the way for a Pax Americana in the region—if only the Israelis could be sidelined. The early Eisenhower administration was their heyday. Eisenhower and Dulles gave such professionals in the State Department and the CIA carte blanche. But the Arabists' massive efforts notwithstanding, Nasser drifted into the Soviet orbit and began spreading nationalist revolt throughout the region.

Why? In answering this question, Mr. Wilford rehashes the conventional wisdom, which holds that, despite its generally pro-Arab stance—including taking Egypt's side against Britain, France and Israel in the 1956 Suez Crisis—the U.S. under the Eisenhower administration still followed in the footsteps of empire and maligned the Arabs. The author might have questioned the core assumptions of the Arabists: Was sidelining Israel really the best way to create a Mideast Pax Americana? Would anti-Western Arabs led by Nasser ever have proved reliable U.S. allies?

But this criticism is a quibble. Mr. Wilford is a careful historian, with no Middle Eastern ax to grind. The main goal of "America's Great Game" is to shed light on the role of the CIA in the Middle East. It succeeds magnificently.

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