Free agents

• GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

Robert Baer spent much of his professional life “in the company of eccentrics, rogues and scoundrels.” He had someone to contact for “just about every occasion,” including a prince of the Jordanian royal family.

Baer, of course, was a CIA agent, with extensive experience in the Middle East, India and Eastern Europe. Posted to Sarajevo, he met Dayna Williamson, a relatively new operative, with a talent for undercover work. In time, they fell in love and shed their spouses. Although they left “The Company,” Bob and Dayna couldn’t stay away from the action. Living in Beirut, they continued to traffic with Arab sheikhs, tycoons, terrorists and assassins.

In The Company We Keep, the Baers do not reveal any CIA secrets. Indeed, they worked with the agency to make sure that no classified material remained in the manuscript. Nor do they examine the relationship between their work and US foreign policy priorities. Instead they provide a lively, and at times scary, account (told in alternating chapters) of the day-to-day experiences of American spies. And they describe the prices that are all too often paid for lives driven by lies, secrecy and hidden agendas.

Although they acknowledge that “in espionage, few mysteries are ever solved,” the Baers indicate that CIA agents never stop asking questions. While on vacation in Peshawar, Pakistan, Bob asks his driver to show him where Osama bin Laden lived in the 1980s. When the man responds, “You say he lived here?” Baer begins to understand how “this man who changed history disappeared like a diamond in an inkwell.”

In a conversation with a “Pashtun fixer,” Baer learns that the Arabs in al-Qaeda eat chicken, while their hosts in the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan prefer mutton. Perhaps American soldiers should have looked for chicken feathers outside houses. Baer doesn’t tell us — and may not know — if this is a joke, a false lead or a piece of the puzzle.

CIA operatives will also use friendship and fear — and enlist family members — to recruit double agents, even though it’s a risky business. To lure “Yuri” away from Tajikistan and his KGB comrades, Bob arranges an all-expenses-paid trip to the US. At Clemson University in South Carolina, which his daughters would like to attend, Yuri watches a football game in the president’s box. In the one-story stucco house in Venice, California, owned by Baer’s mom (who knows nothing about his background), Yuri relaxes and talks about current events. And, in Langley, Virginia, he meets an agency analyst who describes, in graphic detail, how Tajik narcotics smugglers torture KGB officers by cutting off the tips of their fingers and allowing them to bleed to death.

A few months later, it turns out, the analyst Aldrich Ames is arrested for spying for Russia. Yuri calls Bob. He will lose his job — and might be killed. Bob wants to climb into a hole, he tells us, and pull the dirt on top of him. The CIA knew about Ames, “suspected he’d burn Yuri,” but did nothing to wave off the meeting Baer had arranged.

In The Company We Keep, spies are always on the move, changing their names, looking over their shoulders. Since cars and cellphones are their Achilles’ heel, they often drive around to make sure they aren’t followed, take different routes each day to the same destination and change license plates.

Much of the time, it’s all for naught. “Nothing I did in my years at the CIA added or subtracted from the mess out there,” Dayna concludes.

Former spy couple Robert and Dayna Baer provide a lively account of the day-to-day experiences of CIA operatives.