



The Perfect Kill: 21 Laws for Assassins

By Robert B. Baer

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An odyssey through the art, theory, and brutality of modern political murder by Robert Baer, *New York Times*–bestselling author, former CIA operative, and, yes, assassin

All four of Robert B. Baer’s previous books were *New York Times* bestsellers, and it’s no wonder. A recipient of the Career Intelligence Medal, Baer served as a CIA operative for decades, and his career was the model for the acclaimed movie *Syriana*. Now, Baer draws on his extensive firsthand experience—including a decades-long cat-and-mouse hunt for the greatest assassin of the modern age—to examine the serpentine history of political murder. Offering a tantalizing glimpse at the underbelly of world politics, *The Perfect Kill* will be avidly read by thriller fans and military history buffs alike.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A best-selling author and former CIA operative chronicles his experiences as an assassin while offering chilling insight into the fine art of political murder... Fascinating reading from an expert.”—**Kirkus**

“Exposes a niche of the spy world that we are all aware of but know little about: assassination. *The Perfect Kill* is 310 pages of cold calculations, intriguing ethical debates and eyebrow-raising scenes, with Middle East history sprinkled throughout.”—**Washington Post**

“*The Perfect Kill*'s unusual mix of thrilling memoir and political science is a winning combination.”—**Shelf Awareness (starred review)**

“A fascinating, up-close look at the hunt for Radwan, and it's packed with intriguing contemporary and historical details on the assassinations of tyrants.”—**Booklist**

“A thrilling read from start to finish. [Baer] has a narrative voice that is concise, informative and though he occasionally drifts toward the conspiratorial (which isn't a bad thing), he tempers it by clearly defining what is fact and what is conjecture.”—**Ensuing Chapters**

“A true maverick with an undeniably captivating personal story, Baer pulls back the curtain on the underbelly of world politics and the quiet murderers who operate on the fringe of our society.”—**OccuWorld**

Acclaim for *The Devil We Know*

“A masterpiece...Baer's brilliant analysis of Sunni versus Shia, Arab versus Iranian, and Christian versus Muslim is shocking, revealing, and provocative. Baer lifts the veil of Western media hype and challenges the simplistic solutions offered by 'experts' whose vision is blurred by the past. Through his knowledge, long-term experience, and ability to assess the changing landscape of this vital region, he not only shatters the foundations of conventional thinking, but also offers a practicable blueprint for turning things around.”—John Perkins, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*

“The most important and original book on the Middle East to appear in many years. This is a book McCain and Obama should ponder.”

—Thomas Powers, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* and *Intelligence Wars*

“*The Devil We Know*, Bob Baer has once again peered into the future and has brought back uncomfortable truths that won't satisfy any partisan. But his book does force us to do something that, unfortunately, doesn't come naturally to the chattering classes. Think.”

—James Risen, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*

“An important text studded with keen insights into a nation about which America remains dangerously misinformed.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

Acclaim for *Sleeping With the Devil:*

"An unsettling, eye-opening account of our relationship with Saudi Arabia... [Baer] gets our attention."—*Boston Herald*

"Details how an administration known for its vigilance on the international scene routinely and inexplicably spins, caves, and hops for the Saudis."—*The Washington Post*

Acclaim for *The Company We Keep*:

"[A] bloody, suspenseful story of love and deceit."—*Mens Journal*

"*The Company We Keep* is a breezy, often fascinating account of this CIA romance, with tradecraft details and war stories thrown in to make it catnip for any fan of espionage fiction... That the Baers coaxed a happy ending out of all this is not the least remarkable part of their appealing story, and hats off to them."—*The Washington Post*

"Engrossing... filled with juicy, personal on-the-job details... [an] exhilarating tale of geopolitical love and peril."—*More*

"*The Company We Keep* is the best true-life spy story I've ever read... You'll find yourself rooting for these two vagabond spies, and you won't want their exciting and moving story to end."—David Ignatius, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Body of Lies*

"Funny, frightening, ironic, and deeply moving, this is an utterly engrossing thrill ride through the hall of mirrors that is modern espionage... A wonderful book."—Richard North Patterson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Degree of Guilt* and *In the Name of Honor*

"Provides a spot-on and compelling portrait of real life inside the CIA; the periods of boredom and frustration loudly punctuated by fast-moving and sometimes frightening, sometimes amusing intelligence operations. Bob and Dayna Baer are the real deal and they beautifully capture the murky world they lived and worked in for years."—Valerie Plame Wilson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Fair Game*

"Propulsive momentum... the authors give a good sense of the improvisational nature of the CIA... Both Baers write affectingly of their experiences."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A revelation... [shows] how spies operate in the field, the personal costs they pay for the exceptional lives they live, and the way fate can deliver up redemption... I loved this book."—Barry Eisler, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Rain Fall* and *Fault Line*

"An emotionally candid memoir of a life few could imagine, juggling terrorists and dictators with all too real family dramas... describes how two accomplished spies trained in shooting for the heart, improbably found their own."—Jane Mayer, National Book Award Finalist for *The Dark Side*

"After 20 years as the CIA's best and most adventurous spy, Bob Baer has established himself as America's go-to writer on espionage and the Middle East in the age of 9/11. Now he and his wife Dayna have added a heart-stopping new chapter, revealing how a couple caught up in the dark world of CIA intrigue try to balance romance and gunplay while building a relationship on the jagged edge of undercover work... *The Company We Keep* will make you ask, who needs Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie?"—James Risen, Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *State of War*

"A cross between John Le Carre and Erich Segal...Told with flair, intelligence and emotion – and often diary-like detail."—Leslie Stahl, CBS News

"Extraordinary...shows the Baers' ultimate triumph over the isolation inherent in their professions and the banality of bureaucracy worldwide."—Lindsay Moran, author of *Blowing My Cover: My Life as a CIA Spy*

About the Author

Robert B. Baer is one of the most accomplished agents in CIA history, is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on the Middle East, and frequently appears on all major news outlets. Baer writes regularly for Time.com and has contributed to *Vanity Fair*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. He is the current national security affairs analyst for CNN.

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Introduction

Buttonwillow, California, Fourth of July weekend, 2011: It's not even eleven a.m., and already it's more than a hundred degrees. There's some pewter crap in the air draped over the Central Valley like a dirty sheet. With a lane of the I-5 closed for construction, traffic's moving at an infuriating crawl. To relieve the monotony, we pull off for coffee.

While my wife and daughter order at Starbucks, I drive across the street to the Valero station. Waiting for a pump to free up, I check my cell phone to find a text message from a British journalist in Lebanon: "Congrats. U just featured on Al-Manar during Nasrallah's speech defending the indictments."

I stare at my phone as if somehow the words are going to rearrange themselves so I don't figure into them. Getting mentioned in any context on Hezbollah's TV station is never a good thing. But "featured" on it can only spell some special doom.

Until al-Qaeda, Hezbollah had more American blood on its hands than anyone outside traditional war. In the eighties, Hezbollah blew up two of our embassies in Beirut; murdered the CIA chief there; and truck-bombed the Marine barracks near the airport, killing 241. They spread mayhem around the rest of the world, from Bangkok to Buenos Aires, from Paris to Berlin. As for "Nasrallah," he's Hassan Nasrallah, the fierce, black-robed cleric who heads Hezbollah. He's a man as steeped in blood as any of his underlings.

The "indictments" are no mystery either. They refer to news leaks that the special tribunal for Lebanon is about to name four Hezbollah members in the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the billionaire and former Lebanese prime minister. His end came on Valentine's Day 2005, when a suicide bomber rammed an explosives-filled van into his convoy as it traveled through central Beirut, incinerating Hariri and twenty-one others. The business tycoon was a darling of the White House and Riyadh's royal palaces, and his murder rattled a lot of powerful people.

Since then, Hezbollah has tried everything to erase its fingerprints from Hariri's assassination, from murdering key investigators to putting forward a patsy to falsely claim responsibility. So forget what the journalist just texted me: Nasrallah was damning those indictments, not "defending" them. It's a difference of only a few letters, but one with potentially lethal consequences.

It's too late now, but the truth is I walked into this shitstorm on my own two feet and with eyes wide open. It was two years ago when The Hague called me out of the blue to pick my brain on Hariri's assassins. Finding I had a couple of ideas, they hired me as a consultant. They didn't seem to mind I was an ex-CIA operative with a murky past. But idiot me failed to foresee Hezbollah would find out and squeeze it for all it was worth.

I call the British journalist in Lebanon, who gets right to it: Nasrallah railed against The Hague and everyone connected to it. He denied having anything to do with Hariri's murder, reassuring the flock that Hezbollah is the victim of a frame-up.

I picture Nasrallah unloading on The Hague in all of his righteous fury and outrage, not to mention with the awesome authority of a descendant of the Prophet, which Nasrallah believes he is. He's a mousy man with a fat salt-and-pepper beard and fish-cold eyes swimming behind clunky glasses, but the faithful pay rapt attention when he speaks.

The journalist says that halfway through the piece I make my appearance in the guise of a two-year-old TV clip. A voice-over narrator then comes on to accuse me of conspiring with The Hague to frame Hezbollah for Hariri. The motivation? We're both in it for Israel, the narrator says. Zionist lackeys.

The Brit: "Listen to this."

To make certain Al-Manar's viewers know that I'm not just any bastard CIA operative, the narrator "reveals for the first time" that I was behind an old CIA attempt on Lebanon's only ayatollah. Lest anyone forget that infamous moment, they run an archival clip of a neighborhood in flames, burning cars and bodies scattered everywhere. The car bomb missed the ayatollah but killed more than eighty people, women and children too.

The ayatollah, in fact, died of natural causes just a couple of years ago, but even today he possesses a vast, devout following, including hundreds of thousands here in the United States. (For some bizarre reason, many of them supposedly work in the used-car business.)

I'm about to plead that I had nothing to do with trying to murder the ayatollah, but now I consider the possibility some sort of jihad might have been declared on me. If so, the faithful won't slow down long enough to consider it might be me who's being framed in order for Hezbollah to divert attention from its own bloodletting.

I swat away my rising paranoia by comforting myself with the thought that the Lebanese have a venerable history of smoothing over political violence by blaming it on hapless scapegoats, especially foreigners. But would they really bother with a doughy, has-been CIA agent driving to his in-laws' for the Fourth of July? As I'm about to point this out, the Brit chimes back in.

"It gets worse."

Accompanied by some bizarre mix of timpani and a seriously warped version of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, the narrator's voice starts to quaver as he steadies himself to let viewers know that I once planned a crime even more heinous than the attempt on Lebanon's only ayatollah—assassinating Hezbollah's revered bang man.

He was at the center of all of Hezbollah's mayhem-sowing: the Beirut embassy bombings, the Marines, the attacks in Buenos Aires and Bangkok. He captained the most ruthless guerrilla campaigns in modern history, obliging Israel to vacate Lebanon; it was the first time in that country's history that it gave up ground under fire. And by the way, in a fitting end, the man was assassinated in Damascus in 2008.

It was a biblical setback for Hezbollah, sort of as if the Jews had lost Moses crossing the Red Sea. Which makes him Hezbollah's greatest "living martyr." Today his picture's up on giant placards all around Lebanon, his gravesite a shrine. They even built a museum dedicated to him. No one seemed to mind he was up to his lashes in blood, including Hariri's. The way these people look at him, he's their George Washington and Saint Francis all rolled into one, and that's damn well it.

It takes me a beat, but it starts to dawn on me just how deeply I've waded into it now. I, indeed, had made a half-baked attempt on the man; I'd even alluded to it in one of my books. But come on, it was a lifetime ago, it failed miserably, and not a hair on the man's head got touched.

Why would they resurrect it now?

My thoughts by now are flapping around like trapped birds. Are they trying to pin his assassination on me? I sweep the Valero station, stupidly expecting to catch some Hezbollah cutthroat creeping up to righteously slit the throat of the evil CIA operative.

I'm about to tell the Brit I had nothing to do with murdering the man, but the connection's gone scratchy. I want to reach down the line and grab him by the throat to get his attention, but I settle for yelling at my cell phone.

"Nasrallah should think about it the next time he goes around murdering people. He's the assassin, not me." Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a bug-eyed man on the other side of the pump in a strawberry baseball cap and khaki shorts. He's stopped licking his ice cream cone to stare at me.

The line's gone dead, but rather than call back, I finish filling up and drive back across the street to pick up my wife, my daughter, and my Frappuccino.

As we pull back into traffic on the I-5, a trickle of sangfroid starts back through my veins, enough, at least, to think about assassination in generic terms. My old promise to myself to take a look into its dos and don'ts isn't going to let me be. By the way, it's the way things usually work with me, pestering me until I finally do something about it.

I've been around enough political murder to know that with The Hague's Hariri probe I've been sucked down into a poisonous swamp. Operating off dark rules and a pitiless logic all its own, it's a place where the capable assassin does win with one swift, precise, and violent act.

One scalp's enough to end any discussion. I could take a couple pages to list the political blank spots on the map where the rules still hold. But I wonder if it's not more instructive to take a run at answering my old question of why it is that most assassinations add up to nothing.

Normally, I'd go home and dust off the standard references—some Clausewitz of assassination, say. But there isn't one. Nor are the historians much help either. They're more than happy to serve up long laundry lists of political murder, but they are too timid to include even the most deeply buried footnote about a set of possible tactics for assassination. Is it because assassination is still taboo? Then again, I suppose it's only the fool who puts on paper that there might be a science to culling out the bad apples.

What I know for certain is that I'll have to hack assassination down to manageable proportions. Ignoring the legality or formal justification for the act is the easiest decision. Did Hariri's assassin care? Does any assassin care? Anyhow, that's someone else's book. The same holds for what Hunter S. Thompson called "celebrity assassinations"—a psychotic lone wolf with a gun. "Squeaky" Fromme's taking a potshot at Gerald Ford tells us nothing about political murder. Finally, assassinations tied up in armed mutinies, palace intrigue, dynastic struggles, and racial hatred aren't of much interest either. They're more about prejudice, greed, and personal ambition than genuine politics.

What intrigues me more are political murders that truly alter history, for better or worse. For instance, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's. Two bullets put an end to the best chance of a Middle East peace we'll have for who knows how long. But what makes his any different from the rivers of blood that have drowned the

Middle East all these centuries?

Long ago, the ancients decided that the most efficient way to put an end to an intolerable tyranny is tyrannicide. It beats war and civil war hands down. No one since has seriously argued against it. Which makes me wonder why I can't borrow the same measuring stick for modern

political murder. If a murder reduces violence or moves history in the right direction, it's an acceptable social bargain. If it doesn't, it isn't. Going by this standard, very few assassinations would make the cut. But of those that do, surely there have to be lessons attached.

Since assassination, even pared down, is a big, unwieldy subject, I've decided to take as a guide someone who followed the rules and made it work. Namely, Hariri's assassin. In one flick of a switch he decapitated his main enemy (Lebanon's Sunni Muslims), leaving them fragmented

and rudderless. With Hariri out of the picture, he and his side (Hezbollah) inexorably tightened its grip on Lebanon, and in the bargain brought a sort of peace to that troubled nation. If it hadn't been for the Arab Spring, Hezbollah's authority until this day would be effectively uncontested. (I'll get serious pushback on this, but let me develop the argument as I go.)

And Hariri wasn't a one-off either. I was pretty much there at his assassin's coming-out—Lebanon in the early eighties. I watched as he rose from its smoldering civil war like Venus from the half shell, fluently conversant in the fine and shifting relationship between violence and

power. He instinctively understood how symbolic murder and blind slaughter get the assassin nothing. How with each bloodletting, the assassin needs to measurably augment his power. How assassination is a conservative force designed to preserve force and postpone war. How, at bottom, it's a detour around war and civil war.

Like the young Buddha, Hariri's assassin learned the plumbing at an early age—his bombs always went off, he never killed the wrong person, he didn't get caught (or, at least, until Hariri). When you put him down on the examining table with other modern assassins, with all of the dumb blood they've splattered the world with, he was the Leonardo da Vinci of political murder. Even his most implacable enemies conceded him that honor. Or as Hariri's assassin would tell us if he were still alive, either get the basics right or don't touch it.

I understand that borrowing the eyes of a dead, cold-blooded murderer to examine anything isn't everyone's idea of stretching out on a hammock for a pleasant summer's read. (Nor will it be a particular recommendation that the author once plotted his protagonist's murder.) But it's drone strikes, not me, that have turned political murder into a fixed instrument of statecraft. In the primal ooze, as anyone who's been there will tell you, one takes one's lessons where one finds them. And there was never anyone better at it than the man we knew best as Hajj Radwan, roughly the "Delightful One," a nickname not without a little irony.

I spent my best years on the bastard's trail, and although I never laid eyes on him, we were the most intimate of enemies. His rules, as I understand them, follow. So does his life, because he lived the rules. So does mine, because for so long I lived in a world of his invention.

Users Review

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