Had Robert Ames been a public man, a fellow CIA agent claimed, “he would have stood tall in his all-American shoes [cowboy boots] as a Louis L'Amour hero. But he belonged more to John le Carré’s world: anonymous, perceptive, knowledgeable, highly motivated, critical, discreet — with a priest’s and a cop’s understanding of the complexity of human nature in action.”

Thirty years after Ames’ death in the truck bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Kai Bird, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “American Prometheus,” a biography of Robert Oppenheimer, provides an often riveting narrative of his career as a CIA operative, set in the context of the murky, maddening and murderous conflicts in the
Middle East. Although he did not receive the cooperation of anyone currently inside the CIA, Bird also relates fascinating details (drawn from interviews with some 30 retired CIA and Mossad officers) about the culture and practices of the agency, including the life-and-death implications of designating an individual as either a “source,” a “recruit” or an “asset.”

Bird demonstrates that Ames was an extraordinarily well-respected CIA agent, equally adept at operations and analysis, fluent in Arabic, with access to the secretary of state and the president of the United States, who deemed him their “top man” on the Middle East. Ames’ relationship of mutual trust and affection with Ali Hassan Salameh (“The Red Prince”), who served as a “back channel” to PLO leader Yasser Arafat, Bird argues, produced the best opportunity in decades for a U.S.-brokered peace treaty between Israelis and Palestinians.

Ames, did, indeed, facilitate contacts between the United States and the PLO. That said, Bird may have overestimated his influence and impact. Some of Ames’ CIA colleagues, Bird acknowledges, thought his “liaison relationship” with “this murderer” (Salameh) was little more than a “setup” in which Arafat “fed information — which in reality was precious little — to influence U.S. policy and little else.”

Nor can we be certain that the back channel actually created “a virtual nonaggression pact between the U.S. government and Arafat’s Fatah guerillas.” After all, Arafat may have decided, even without the promptings of a “middle man,” that continued attacks on Western targets would make it less likely that the United States would recognize the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and nationhood.

There is also reason to doubt Bird’s claim that Ames opened “a back door to a peace settlement” in the 1970s, since Secretary of State Henry Kissinger remained convinced that the dynamics of the Palestinian movement “made it unlikely that such moderation could be maintained indefinitely”; or that Ames was “the ghostwriter” of the 1980s Reagan peace initiative, given Secretary of State George Shultz’s dismissal of “the professional optimism, even wishful thinking, for which the Arabists in the (U.S.) government were known.”

It also appears that Ames’ sympathy for the Palestinians and his hostility to Israel led him, on occasion, to act in ways that were at odds with the wishes of his superiors.
Shultz “would have been shocked to learn,” Bird writes, without further comment, for example, that Ames had made it possible for Arafat to see a summary of the peace plan “before Reagan unveiled it.”

Inevitably, perhaps, given the covert nature of his work, Bird is not able to nail down Ames’ influence on America’s foreign policy. But he does humanize him and, by implication, honors the dedication of CIA agents. Ames, he reveals, preferred poetry (especially Rudyard Kipling’s “If”) to fiction, shot baskets near his garage on weekends, enjoyed spicy food, loved his wife, told his six children he worked as a Foreign Service officer in the State Department, and combatted loneliness when he was on the road by listening to BBC News and reading the Economist. According to Bird, Ames viewed his profession as a calling, not a sacrifice, and preferred Third World “hellholes” to a posting in London or Paris. It was not that he was “too much of an intellectual,” Bird writes. “It was that he loved those damned, troublesome Arabs too much.”

Ames died for them, you might say, as well as for his country. And it’s difficult to finish reading “The Good Spy” without liking and respecting him. Even as it leaves you wondering whether his colleagues at the CIA were a lot like him — and how much respect and admiration you are willing to bestow on “the agency.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail: books@sfchronicle.com

The Good Spy

The Life and Death of Robert Ames

By Kai Bird

(Crown; 430 pages; $26)