

***Book Review***

## **Assassination in Khartoum**

*By David A. Korn. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993, 296 pp.*

This is a fascinating insider's account of one of the most tragic events in the history of the American Foreign Service. Cleo Noel and Curt Moore were among the Foreign Service's finest professionals—dedicated, hard-working men of impeccable integrity. Although from very different backgrounds, hard work had brought them close to the pinnacle of the service.

Circumstances brought them together on 1 March 1973 at the residence of the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Khartoum. The ambassador was hosting a diplomatic farewell party for Moore, and newly-appointed Ambassador Noel was attending as a courtesy. As the party was ending around 7:00 p.m., eight heavily armed Palestinians of the Black September extremist organization burst in and seized all diplomats who failed to flee. Most were unharmed, but Curt Moore, whom they had been told (incorrectly) was the chief CIA agent for the Middle East, Cleo Noel, and (inexplicably) the Belgian charge d'affaires, were singled out, beaten, and tied up. Ironically, as fair-minded and objective professionals, Noel and Moore were dedicated to establishing the best possible relations between the United States and the Arab world and were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

What happened during the next thirty hours leading up to the brutal assassination is told in chilling detail by Korn, who was then a Foreign Service officer serving in Washington on the task force dealing with the hostage crisis. Mr. Korn also has had extensive experience in Arab-Israeli affairs and is able to put the subsequent events, personalities involved, and government actions in the context of the early 1970s. For example, he leaves little doubt that Yasser Arafat and Fatah were involved, if not actually directing, the Khartoum operation as part of their effort to refurbish their radical credentials in competition with George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which had carried out most of the airplane hijackings of the early 1970s. In addition, he is able to explain, but with no attempt to justify, the less-than-courageous roles played by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudanese president Jafaar Nimeiry, and others.

Korn is highly critical of Washington's handling of the case. He documents the uncertainty that existed about American policy toward hostage-taking, describes Under Secretary of State Macomber's futile flight to Khartoum, and bemoans the shortcomings of the State Department's Operations Center task force. Furthermore, he sees President Nixon's "macho" press conference on 2 March, when Noel and Moore were still alive, as the most serious blunder of all. Nixon ignored the State Department's advice and rejected the terrorists' demands outright, thereby undercutting the Sudanese general who was in contact with them. Many believed at the time that this event sealed the hostages' doom. In fact, the Nixon-Kissinger policy of "no negotiations, no deals, and no concessions" with terrorists had not been thought through thoroughly or stated earlier: It had been discussed only in some high-level staff meetings, and Secretary of State Rogers had refused to approve it. Korn believes Nixon and Kissinger thought their policy was modeled on Israel's, the toughness of which they admired and wanted to emulate as much as possible. This reflected, in Korn's words,

a profound if rather common misunderstanding. The Israelis loudly proclaimed a policy of refusing to pay ransom. They put up a tough front, and in fact they often did refuse to pay ransom, but only when they saw a possibility of freeing their people

through their own military action or in some other way; where there clearly was no such possibility, they almost always sought a deal, albeit for the most part secretly . . . they never deliberately sacrificed anyone to the principle of "no deals."

In June 1974, sixteen months after the assassinations, a Sudanese court sentenced the eight terrorists to life imprisonment. Nimiery commuted the sentences immediately to seven years and let the prisoners leave Khartoum for Egypt in the custody of the PLO. Friends and family of Noel and Moore were outraged, as were most members of the Foreign Service. Only fast action by Ambassador Hermann Eilts, acting on his own initiative, persuaded the Egyptians to hold the prisoners in Egypt. Secretary of State Kissinger and his "hatchet man" Larry Eagleberger, exhibiting a remarkable willingness to let bygones be bygones, moved toward the restoration of normal relations with Sudan and even made direct contact with the PLO on the grounds of overriding policy considerations brought about by the October 1973 war and the ensuing Arab-Israeli negotiations. The terrorists, or at least five of them (three disappeared), reportedly served out the seven-year sentences in Egypt. Throughout the 1970s, however, Washington never sent Ambassador Eilts "any kind of instruction or even inquiry about the Black September killers detained in Cairo."

Given the obvious implications of the assassinations for American Middle Eastern policy and policy toward terrorism, it is amazing that Kissinger makes only one brief passing reference to it in his memoirs and that Nixon ignores it altogether in his. This silence by the two men most responsible for dealing with the event and its policy ramifications speaks volumes about how it was handled. Despite the generally bleak canvas that Korn paints of expediency vanquishing principle, there are some heroes: the wives of Noel and Moore, for the great dignity with which they endured their tragedy (no histrionics, no movie deals); Ambassador William Brewer, who, usually acting on his own, tried single-handedly to hold the Sudanese government accountable for releasing the terrorists; and Tex Harris, the American Foreign Service Association, and FSO Henry Blaney, all of whom criticized their superiors for allowing "policy considerations" to override justice and who tried to bring about more flexible and humane policies when considering the lives and well-being of people.

Mr. Korn is to be commended for this thorough study, which is the first detailed account of the event to be published. The Rand Corporation had done a 78-page classified study in November 1976, which Mr. Korn managed to get declassified in 1991 and to which he gives due credit.

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