

# The spy who inspired George Clooney

*Former CIA officer Bob Baer tells Neil Tweedie about dodging bullets in the Middle East, coaching a Hollywood movie star – and why he believes the car bomb is the terrorist's deadliest weapon*

Bob Baer is sitting in a candlelit London restaurant remembering his plan to assassinate Saddam Hussain.

"We had some Iraqi generals and they were going to send some tanks up the road to a compound where Saddam was known to be staying. They were to surround it and level it."

It was the CIA man's straightforward, "kinetic" solution to the dictator and was promptly vetoed by a nervous Clinton White House. Saddam went on to rule for another eight years and to die at the end of a rope.

Baer is 56 but looks 10 years younger. Tanned, bespectacled and casually dressed, he could be a West Coast academic or a big fish in Californian IT. He is softly spoken, too, preferring not to waste words.

Not much like George Clooney – not anything like George Clooney, actually. But it was Baer on whom Clooney based his character in the 2005 film *Syriana*, a labyrinthine examination of oil, money and power in the Middle East.

Clooney plays a burnt-out CIA case officer who, at the end of the film, decides to abandon cynical power-politicking and do the right thing. Which gets him blown up.

Baer was the real thing: a career case officer in the agency's directorate of operations, based mostly in the Middle East, whose job it was to penetrate the inner workings of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups by recruiting agents, or "assets". Based for a time in Beirut, he risked kidnap or assassination when meeting potential sources, and was routinely shelled and shot at in the course of his duties. The casualty rate for the CIA station in Lebanon at the height of that country's civil war was 60 per cent.

There was another cost: his marriage broke down and with it his relationship with

his children.

After 21 years as a spy Baer resigned, disillusioned with an organisation he judged fatally unfit for purpose. Now he is a journalist with a column, four books to his name, including a forthcoming one on Iran, *The Devil We Know: Dealing With the New Iranian Superpower*, published in the UK in September, and a new Channel 4 documentary, *Car Bomb*, which chronicles the weapon's development.

But first, modern priorities being what they are, the showbiz. Baer spent a week travelling with Clooney, instructing him in the ways of the spook. It was instructive for him, too.

"I stayed with Clooney at his house on Lake Como. The girls were sitting in the branches of trees trying to catch a glimpse of him. Still, at least he can relax there. He eats dinner with his staff, plays basketball with their kids.

"But when you travel outside you get caught in the glow of Hollywood – this world in which you fly into an airport and there's this car and a van and a minder from Warner Brothers. And you ask: 'What's the van for?' and the guy says: 'For your luggage.' I usually carry just a backpack.

"We flew on Clooney's jet to Baltimore and the immigration people came on – not to get his passport but to carry his luggage."

So, not for him then?

"It means money, beautiful women and going anywhere you want, all of the time. But people bug him, all of the time. He tries to stay grounded but it must be really hard. Can you imagine having somebody to hold your mobile phone for you?"

Baer's life may not have been in the Clooney league, but it had its compensations.

"I was in Paris for three years and had an unlimited budget – any restaurant, any bottle of wine. Can you imagine what that does to your liver? The scope for adultery is amazing. In Paris I was out until seven in the morning – and that was an early night."

Baer says almost every storyline in *Syriana* is based on truth. In his account of his CIA career, *See No Evil*, he lambasted his political masters for placing the needs of the oil lobby over the fight against terrorism. He is vehemently anti-neocon, describing the invasion of Iraq as a disaster, and a believer in *détente* with Iran. He knows this view, aired in his new book, will make him unpopular with Washington hawks.

"Iran is the *de facto* regional power, which we cannot go on ignoring. The Iranians

can close the Gulf, take out tankers, destroy terminals. Iran's deterrence is oil. I can't imagine the United States surviving economically on \$12-a-gallon petrol. Britain could, if it took off the tax. What's Bush going to say – everyone get on a bicycle?

"It wasn't the Iranians who attacked us on 9/11, it was the Sunnis. I do not believe Iran wants to destroy Israel; I do not believe they are suicidal."

Iran has another potential weapon in its "asymmetric" armoury, the car bomb. Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shi'ite terrorist

organisation directed from Tehran, is the most formidable in existence, and it knows about car (and truck) bombs.

"The car bomb defeats its enemies.

For the first time in its history Israel lost a war, in May 2000. It had to leave Lebanon with no gains, heavy losses and Hizbollah intact.

"What we are seeing is a war-winning weapon. It's unstoppable, it can cause billions of dollars of damage to your economy. Take one of these things and jacket it with a radiological source and let it off in Manhattan. Bang! – America is plunged into a 1929-type depression. The constitution would be ripped up.

"Hizbollah could set off 50 car bombs in London in military order – the same in the US. They are professionals."

**B**aer was born in Colorado and first aspired to be a ski bum in the Rockies. His mother, with whom he enjoyed a difficult relationship, was unimpressed by his lack of application to his studies and packed him off to military academy. So, what led him into the nether world of the CIA?

"A prank. I was studying Chinese at Berkeley, working as a bank teller at night. My friend told me to grow up and get a real job, get married. We started joking: 'What about the CIA?' I was sleeping on his couch. He went to work. I called 'em up and asked for an application form."

They liked him. In he went, spending a year in training, including a four-month paramilitary course. As a result, he can make a pretty handy car bomb himself.

But what makes a good spy?

"Curiosity, an ability to read, an ability to change your assumptions. And then you have got to be able to close the deal. I can't sell anything to anyone so I don't know how I did it, but the person has to like you – it's very personal. My success was in reading everything – staying late.

"The best thing for my career was having a bad marriage, because I didn't have a place to go home to at night. If I'd got home at

six o'clock each night and sat down with a very happy family I would have been a total bureaucrat, and then I would never have been able to go out and talk to these people."

His first marriage, to a US diplomat, went downhill from the honeymoon. Foreign postings meant he could avoid troubles back home. Baer grew steadily more estranged from his children.

But 10 years ago he met his second wife, also a CIA officer. The two resigned from the agency and, unable to have children, adopted a child in Pakistan.

"She's a delight," says Baer. "And what's good now is the ability to be honest about everything, not having to lie."

An honest question, then: was he ever directly in the firing line?

"A couple of bullets have come very close but they weren't aimed directly at me. It's really a very sedate profession."

● *Episode 1 of 'Car Bomb' is on Channel 4 this Sunday at 7pm*