

The Mole In the Hill: A Spy Story

How Aldrich Ames
Became a Literary Critic

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By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

How's this for a mystery plot: Famous columnist conspires with convicted spy to publish negative review of columnist's novel—thereby bringing scribe oodles of publicity?

Could William Safire really be so devilishly clever?

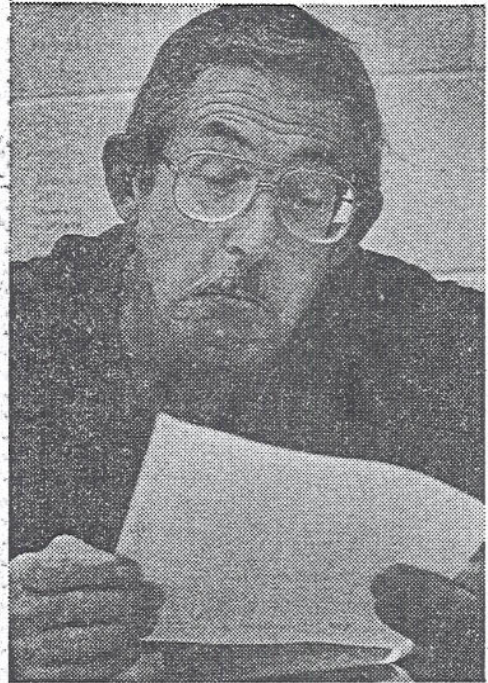
Would Aldrich Ames really play the role of literary critic?

Apparently so. This week's edition of the Hill, a Capitol Hill newspaper, carries the front-page headline: "Aldrich Ames reviews Safire's 'Sleeper Spy.'" And Safire was the trench-coated intermediary who arranged for Hill Publisher Martin Tolchin to obtain the poison-pen document. This was no shadowy coincidence, either, for Safire, the veteran New York Times columnist, got Tolchin his job.

Ames, of course, is no garden-variety spy. The former CIA official is serving a life sentence at Allenwood after pleading guilty to passing secrets to the Soviets. His treachery led to the deaths of at least 10 Soviet-bloc agents who were conducting espionage for the United States.

Tolchin says he's had a spate of angry calls, outraged letters and canceled subscriptions.

See AMES, F2, Col. 4



BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Convicted spy Aldrich Ames: His review of William Safire's novel "Sleeper Spy" was brought to the Hill newspaper by Safire himself.

The Spy Turned Critic

AMES, From F1

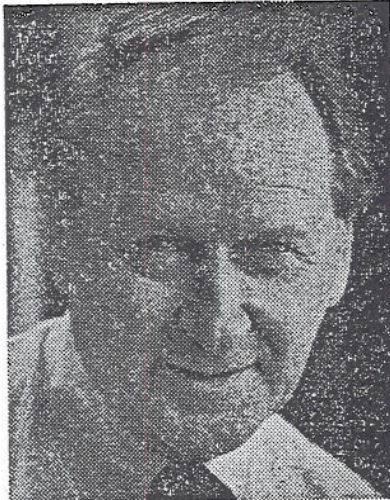
A former CIA agent who now works for Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole told Tolchin he would never read the Hill again.

Rich Thomas, a Newsweek reporter, fired off a note saying, "What the hell were you thinking of?" He called Ames "perhaps the greatest single traitor in the last three decades . . . and you think it's cute to turn him into a reviewer?"

Tolchin, a former Times reporter, is reveling in the controversy. He says he's also gotten kudos for his journalistic "coup."

"I believe in the First Amendment," Tolchin said. "Everyone has a right to speak his piece. We have things to learn from everyone, even those who have committed the most despicable crimes. I'd love to have interviewed the greatest tyrants in history: Hitler, Torquemada, you name 'em.

"We didn't do it to be cute. We



William Safire, author of the spy novel panned by Aldrich Ames.

thought it'd be interesting to get a super-spy to review a book about a spy."

Ames, who affects a breezy style, sniffs that "Sleeper Spy" is filled with "fabricated expertise and insider portentousness." He says Safire serves up a "preposterous plot" and "heavy-duty cardboard . . . characters" and has "a tin ear for dialogue." What's more, Ames declares, Safire's "obdurate ignorance" of modern language has "reduced the act to a self-important gong show."

Said Safire: "It's an honor to be panned by a traitor. I would have been embarrassed if he liked it." He said curious readers would see

through Ames's criticism and discover that "Safire's trade-craft was better than Ames's."

Ames's lawyer, Plato Cacheris, says he submitted the review to the CIA for clearance. "I don't see a moral question," he said. "He's entitled to write anything he can get by with." Besides, "he's got a lot of time on his hands."

Ames first tried to get his review posted on the Internet. When that failed, Cacheris offered to show it to Safire, an old acquaintance. Ames said fine, and Cacheris whispered in Safire's ear at a Washington Redskins game. Safire notified Tolchin, who loved the idea, and Cacheris faxed over the review.

"The price was right," Tolchin said, referring to the fact that Ames is barred by law from accepting payment for his writing. He said he would not have paid Ames for the piece.

The final subplot is that Safire recommended Tolchin for the Hill job when Safire's old public relations partner, New York publisher Jerry Finkelstein, was launching the paper last year. And Tolchin, whose paper had already published a review of Safire's book by Maine Sen. William Cohen, makes no bones about the fact that he wanted to help his close friend.

"Sure, absolutely," he said. "I thought it would keep up interest in his book."