

# The Contras, Counter-Intelligence and

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## A SPY FOR ALL SEASONS My Life in the CIA

By Duane R. Clarridge with Digby Diehl  
Scribner. 430 pp. \$27.50

By David Wise

IT WASN'T EASY running the Central Intelligence Agency's unsecret war in Nicaragua during the '80s, according to Duane R. "Dewey" Clarridge, the controversial former CIA official in charge. There was the liberal American news media, a bad, leftish lot, and the pesky Congress that kept passing "cowardly" laws to try to stop the agency's covert operation. Then there was the president of Honduras, too

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drunk to meet with the CIA, the propaganda balloons that floated off in the wrong direction, and the constant problem of resupplying the contras. Clarridge sent in pack mules from Honduras, but "Once inside [Nicaragua] the guerrillas ate the mules!"

One scene above all captures the tone of this swaggering, defiant memoir. The free-wheeling William Casey, Ronald Reagan's CIA director, was pressuring Clarridge to do more to support the contra rebels in their war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. One evening early in 1984, Clarridge was at home, thinking. "I remember sitting with a glass of gin on the rocks, smoking a cigar (of course), and pondering my dilemma, when it hit me. Sea mines were the solution. We should mine the harbors of Nicaragua. . . . To this day I wonder why I didn't think of it sooner."

Mining the harbors proved a political disaster, as Clarridge —Continued on page 10

## CONFESSIONS OF A SPY

By Pete Earley  
Putnam. 364 pp. \$27.50

By Jefferson Morley

HE IS the O.J. Simpson of the cloak and dagger crowd—a lawbreaker whose murderous deeds continue to evoke moral fascination and divided loyalties. He is "hen-pecked, lazy, a nerd with an attitude," according to the sages of Newsweek. A former director of the KGB calls him "a humanitarian" while a former CIA official insists he is "worse than Benedict Arnold." He is, of course, Aldrich Hazen Ames, the former CIA official now serving a life sentence in prison for selling

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## the KGB

secrets to the Soviet Union.

Pete Earley's *Confessions of a Spy* is the fifth volume on the Ames bookshelf. Its greatest strength is Ames's voice. Here is a fair portrait of a half-repentant man, a forcibly retired bureaucrat who is both cunningly intelligent and disturbingly stupid. Born and bred in the bosom of the national-security bureaucracy (his father was a CIA man), Ames bravely attempts to explain how love, loathing of Ronald Reagan and a lack of self-esteem trans- —Continued on page 10

# Confessions Of a Spy

Continued from page 1

formed him from competent spy into paper-pushing sociopath.

*Confessions of a Spy*, however, also shows the limitations of the true-crime genre for capturing the full realities of the Ames story. Why is it that editorial cartoonists can make great sport of this hang-dog covert operator who became a millionaire right in front of the uncomprehending eyes of his colleagues in the "intelligence" business while journalistic accounts of the same story are inevitably so solemn? The outbursts of black comedy that punctuate the Ames affair cry out, not just for the dogged earnestness of a reporter like Earley but for the malice of a wit.

Consider this absurdist tale that Earley elicited from Ames in one of their jailhouse conversations. In August 1985 a senior Soviet official named Vitaly Yurchenko defected to the United States. Ames, a Soviet specialist, was assigned to debrief him—to question him to find out what he knew. Ames was also a spy. Just two months earlier, he had begun passing secrets to the KGB in exchange for \$50,000. Ames picks up the Russian at Andrews Air Force base and starts pumping him for information while they are still in the car. Yurchenko tells his American host straight off that the KGB suspects one of its top operators in Great Britain of working for the West. His name is Oleg Gordievsky, and Ames is one of a handful of CIA officials who knew his true identity.

"My first thought was Jesus Christ we've got to do something to save him," Ames recalled thinking. "We've got to get a cable to London and tell the Brits. And then, I realized that I had given the KGB Gordievsky's name. I was responsible for his arrest!"

Ooops.

"That's how compartmentalized I was," Ames explained. But, of course, it is precisely the menace of moral compartmentalization that drains the Ames tale of its inherent humor. Ames is at his creepiest when he talks about the victims of his treachery.

"In some strange way, I, just like [Benedict] Arnold, came to believe that I had the personal right to make these judgments—that I understood these things better than my leaders," Ames said. He explained that he was "convinced that American autonomy, safety, and in-

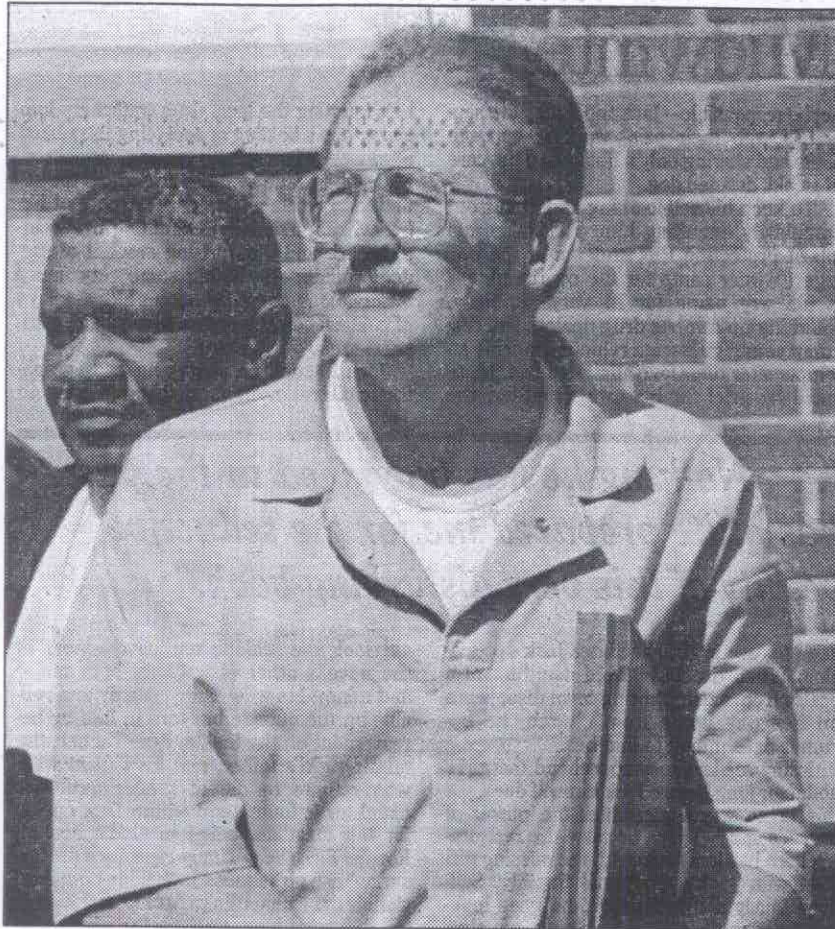
terests were not at hazard, nor were American lives. Tremendous harm was inflicted upon a relatively few people, a responsibility I cannot evade or deny, and many felt great pain and anguish over it all. But to put it starkly, we were not at war, despite the decades of hype and lies."

**W**HAT IS STRANGE about this explanation is that Ames seems to think that if he betrayed Soviet traitors and not the United States, responsibility for the deaths of others is diminished. "Tremendous harm was inflicted"? Ten human beings died solely as the result of Ames's desire to drive a Jaguar, pay his credit-card bills and undermine Ronald Reagan's cold war.

One of Ames's victims, whose affecting story Earley nicely recounts, was Gen. Dmitri Polyakov, the U.S. government's single most valuable source of information inside the Soviet Union for 18 years. Polyakov did not sell secrets for money. He helped the U.S. government because he knew the Soviet system was a monstrous failure and an affliction on the Russian people. After the Soviets learned his identity from papers given to them by Ames, he was recalled from his *dacha* outside Moscow, where he was happily retired with his grandchildren. He was tried and executed with a pistol shot to the back of the head so that his face would be obliterated.

It is not strange that Aldrich Ames has the ability to sever any moral connection between his acts and their bloody results. He was, after all, an off-promoted career employee of the Operations Directorate of the CIA, an institution not noted for its sentimentality about moral considerations. Recent news reports confirm that in the 1980s U.S. national security agencies routinely arranged for hundreds of Latin American military officers to be schooled in the black arts of torture and extrajudicial execution. In the final years of the Cold War, there were, it is certain, more than a few peasants, intellectuals and leftist activists who, like General Polyakov, got a bullet in the head because of the decisions of ethically compartmentalized CIA officers. But it is odd, and a little unsettling, that Ames, sitting in jail for the rest of his life, still cannot quite seem to grasp that betraying people may be just as odious as betraying a government.

Now that the Soviet Union is gone for good, Americans are beginning tentatively to discuss the vast and subtle ways that American ethics shaped and was shaped by the conflict with the Soviet Union. In the meantime, the story of Aldrich Ames will remain an unsettling reminder of the moral abyss at the heart of the Cold War. ■



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**Former CIA agent Aldrich Ames in 1994 after pleading guilty to espionage and tax evasion conspiracy charges**

# A Spy for All Seasons

Continued from page 1

concedes. Soviet, British, Dutch and Japanese ships hit the CIA's mines, and Congress and the press went into "hysteria." In particular Barry Goldwater, the conservative chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was upset. "Dear Bill," he wrote to Casey, "I am pissed off! . . . it is an act of war."

**D**EWY CLARRIDGE (he was nicknamed for the mustached governor, not the admiral) was a natty dresser known around the agency for his white silk suits, colorful pocket handkerchiefs, and matching tough-guy vocabulary. In his 30 years inside Langley, he made a lot of enemies, and he forgets none. He settles old scores with undisguised glee. CIA chief William Webster, an Amherst graduate and a respected former federal judge and FBI director, is dismissed as a "hayseed" and a "social climber." Webster's sin? He reprimanded and demoted Clarridge over the Iran-contra scandal. United States senators are "piranhas," the members of the Tower Commission "the Three Stooges." And so on.

Clarridge has no use for "spongy liberals." But he reserves his greatest contempt for the "hounds of the press." He

confesses to "my lifelong distaste for journalists" whose "motives" he began to question as a young case officer in India.

Although Clarridge suffers from a chronic case of machismo, and an unbounded ego (he describes his treatise on terrorists as "probably the most brilliant paper . . . that I had ever put together"), his memoir is redeemed in part by flashes of unusual candor. He describes his mistakes and moments of personal embarrassment, and the agency's failures, as unsparingly as his triumphs.

For example, he says he knows of not a single significant case where the CIA recruited a Soviet—even though that was the agency's major target around the globe during more than four decades of Cold War. (The Soviet agents who worked for the CIA were all walk-in volunteers, he reports.) He admits that the agency's intelligence about tiny Grenada, hardly a difficult place to penetrate, was "lousy." He is frank to describe the CIA's conflicts with the Drug Enforcement Administration, tells how the agency used pornographic videos to recruit African diplomats, and discloses that, some time after the Black September murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the CIA had a "relationship" with the Arab terrorist who masterminded the crime.

A dentist's son from New Hampshire, Clarridge went to prep school and Brown University, joined the CIA and was sent by the Clandestine Services, the agency's spook side, to Nepal, New Delhi, Madras, Istanbul and Ankara, where he had the wit to spot Aldrich Ames as poor case-officer material. To Clarridge's later regret, he recommended that Ames be assigned to counterintelligence. After a stint as Rome station chief, Clarridge came into his own and became chief of the Latin America division and architect of the contra war.

To make sure the contras would "seize the ethical high ground in the conflict with

the Sandinistas," Clarridge explains, "we created a course in how the contras should deal with the civilian population." The course taught "what kind of activities—rape, murder, plundering, and other crimes—were clearly off limits."

Alas, Clarridge became entrapped in his own war when Oliver North asked for a spot of help in moving a shipment of HAWK missiles from Israel to Iran, part of Reagan's scheme to trade arms for hostages. Clarridge later testified to congressional investigating committees that, at the time of the shipment, he thought the cargo was "oil drilling equipment." In 1991, Clarridge was indicted on seven felony counts of lying, carrying a potential penalty on each count of five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. He wore a camouflage jacket to his arraignment. Clarridge never went to trial; he was pardoned by President Bush along with five others on Christmas Eve of 1992. At his farewell party at the agency, he proudly recounts, he was given "a model of the mine we had used in the harbors of Nicaragua."

In a coda reasonably free of bombast, Clarridge offers some interesting, even valuable, thoughts on the agency's problems and its future. He is pessimistic about the future of the Clandestine Services, and—in his typical take-no-prisoners style—charges that former CIA director John M. Deutch "drove a knife into its back."

Dewey Clarridge says his only motive in joining the CIA was to advance American interests, defend his country and contain Soviet communism. But those laudable goals are not accomplished by running covert operations that circumvent the law or by misleading Congress. One does not save democracy by violating its rules. Dewey Clarridge didn't get it. He still doesn't. ■