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Unraveling a Spy's Web

By EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

On April 28, 1994, Aldrich Hazen Ames, a longtime CIA officer, pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Ames had been chief of counterintelligence for the Soviet Bloc division of the CIA between 1983 and 1985. He admitted to divulging—during that period, from that vantage point—the identity of over a dozen of the CIA's secret sources in the Soviet Bloc in return for payments from the KGB of \$2.7 million and the promise of another \$1.9 million. He was, in other words, a big-time capitalist mole, and he continued working in this capacity until he was arrested on Feb. 21, 1994—President's Day, as it happens.

What made Ames's confession even more sensational was that he acknowledged having betrayed not just the CIA's best agents but "virtually all Soviet agents of the CIA and other American and foreign intelligence services known to me." Since Ames's counterintelligence job gave him "need to know" access to all the intelligence-service reporting from the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency and other services—after all, as counterintelligence chief, Ames had to check the bona fides of newly recruited sources by seeing how their data fitted in with established sources—he gave away the entire American espionage system to the KGB. And since the KGB now knew all the human sources through which the CIA was deriving its picture of the Soviet Union, it was in the position of a Mafia don who knows which of his telephones the cops are bugging. The Soviets could either remove these sources or use them to pass disinformation to the CIA. And they could make sure that all the information they passed along dovetailed

neatly with what they wanted the CIA to think. From 1985 on, Ames had, in short, put the KGB in control of American espionage. Aside from betraying agents, this disaster finally, and fully, exposed the vulnerability of the U.S. central intelligence system.

It revealed that the CIA's first line of defense—lie-detector tests administered by the CIA's Office of Security—had repeatedly failed. It revealed that the second line of defense, counterespionage,



Bookshelf

Roundup

The Aldrich Ames story

which is the responsibility of the FBI, had failed—at least for eight years. Most important, it showed that so-called technical intelligence—satellites and signal interception, which consume 90% of the intelligence budget—was unable to detect a failure in the espionage system, thus exposing the fallacy that superhuman sources will detect disinformation by human sources. Finally, it suggested that the Soviet intelligence service, even after the dissolution of the USSR, had remained intact enough to preserve the Ames secret.

Now, hardly a year after Ames's sentencing, we have four first-rate books describing this amazing case. By far the most gripping is Peter Maas's "Killer Spy" (Warner, 243 pages, \$21.95). Mr. Maas, a gifted investigative reporter and author, tells the story of Ames's detection and capture by the FBI at such a breathtaking pace that I cannot imagine that his account will not be made into a movie. The strength, and weakness, of his book is that it is told from a single point of view—the

FBI's (which provided Mr. Maas with great interviews).

David Wise's "Nightmover" (Harper-Collins, 356 pages, \$25), on the other hand, tells the story of the chase from the CIA's point of view. The author of half a dozen spy books, Mr. Wise provides a more conspiratorial and complex view of the case. The wilderness of mirrors he explores, while it may be fascinating to intelligence buffs, has the effect of confusing the narrative at times, and slowing it down.

James Adams's "Sell Out" (Viking, 322 pages, \$23.95) is a solid piece of reporting. As Washington bureau chief of the London Sunday Times, Mr. Adams manages to put the chase in a larger context. Most important, he includes three indispensable appendices: the findings of the CIA inspector general and the recommendations of the Senate and House Intelligence committees.

Finally, there is "Betrayal: The Story of Aldrich Ames" (Random House, 308 pages, \$25), a truly extraordinary achievement. Written in less than a year by three New York Times correspondents—Tim Weiner, David Johnston and Neil A. Lewis—it is in my opinion the best book ever written on a case of espionage. The story they tell goes well beyond the story of a CIA careerist sinking in the muck of his own greed, or the story of the pathetically belated capture of a spy by the FBI. It is the story of a deep failure that cuts to the core of American intelligence.

"Betrayal" especially, but all the Ames books to varying degrees, are essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what happened to the CIA in the last decade.

Mr. Epstein is the author of "Deception: The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA" and other books on espionage.

Not unexpectedly Epstein makes no mention of the failure of the CIA's counterintelligence staff. It failed much more than the FBI and may be responsible for the FBI's failure.