Т Я Д І Т О Я S: Patriotism for Sale

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The Central Intelligence Agency was created in 1947 during the early stages of the Cold War while America was under the threat of Communism. The purpose of the CIA is to protect America and its interests abroad through clandestine work. Since its creation, the agency members seemed to exhibit a strong sense of brotherhood and unity that is often exhibited by fraternal organizations. Many members of the CIA believed in the illusion that their agency had a God-like power. This belief stemmed from the notion that the Cold War was a battle of good versus evil. The U.S. was representing the good, and the CIA was on the front lines of that battle. The CIA employs spies to find out the national secrets of other countries that could be useful to U.S. security and dominance. All successful spies must be traitors; the problem arose when the traitors working for the agency turned into the traitors working against the agency. The overconfidence led many in the CIA to feel as if their agency was immune to betrayal from its traitorous employees. The Biblical story of Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus with a kiss for 30 silver coins, tells us that every one of us, including the supposed son of God, is vulnerable to betrayal by the individuals closest to us. The men in charge of the CIA seem to have ignored the moral of Judas' story, and as a result they jeopardized the safety of countless Americans.

If someone at the CIA had kept that ancient tale of wisdom in mind, perhaps history would not have repeated itself. Russian novelist Boris Pasternak wrote in *Doctor Zhivago* that "those who wield power are so anxious to establish the myth of their own infallibility that they turn their back on truth as squarely as they can."[1] The CIA's Achilles heel was made of that very myth of infallibility that Pasternak wrote about and it allowed three Judases to betray the agency to its biggest enemy and rival, the KGB. During the 1980's Aldrich Ames, Edward Lee Howard, and Harold James Nicholson were the three CIA employees that did more damage to the agency than any Soviet-born KGB agent ever could.

The Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's predecessor, employed and trained the first of these American traitors. The OSS, America's first intelligence organization, was created during World War II to help combat the Nazis. During World War II, a cryptanalysis project was started by the U.S. Army's Signal Intelligence Service. The name of the project was VENONA, and its objective was to identify possible Soviet spies posing as loyal Americans.

VENONA's revelations created alarm through the U.S. Intelligence community, but they were quickly forgotten. In his article on VENONA in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Rodney Carlisle noted that the objective of VENONA was to "examine and possibly exploit encrypted Soviet diplomatic communications. Early analysis of the messages revealed that some were from KGB and GRU (Soviet intelligence services) operatives working undercover in the United States." Various branches of the U.S. government were penetrated by Soviet spies. In their book about project

[1] Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 274.

VENONA, John Haynes and Harvey Klehr stated that they were able to "identify twelve Soviet agents within the OSS."[2] The CIA was aware of the problems that the OSS had with traitors, yet the religious-like belief in the myth of their infallibility stopped the CIA from preventing the same problems from plaguing them. The difference between the OSS's traitors and the CIA's traitors is that the OSS men betrayed America because they agreed with communist ideology, while the CIA's traitors betrayed America for the money. Countless Soviet citizens spying for the West have been executed or imprisoned along with their family members as a result of Ames's, Howard's and Nicholson's greed.

Greed did not seem to be the factor for the OSS's spies because the immaterial values of post-World War II America differed drastically from the cultural materialism of 1980's America. On July 15th 1979 American President Jimmy Carter warned his fellow Americans that "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns."[3] A little over a year after hearing President Carter's warning the American people decided not to re-elect President Carter. The people voted instead for President Reagan, who did not accuse the American people of worshiping self-indulgence and consumption. In 1980 in his address accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit, President Reagan stated that "the economic prosperity of our people is a fundamental part of our

[2] John E. Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999), 194.
[3] "Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals: 'The Malaise Speech,'" *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32596.

environment."[4] The idealization of economic prosperity that presided during the 80's created an atmosphere in which Ames, Lee, and Nichols could almost feel justified for their treasonous actions.

Many individuals joining the CIA do so because they feel that it is their patriotic duty as a citizen. Unfortunately for the CIA some of their employees' patriotism was for sale. The first CIA employee known to be spying for the KGB was Edward Lee Howard. After he realized that the FBI was closing in on him, Howard defected and escaped to Moscow. Howard wrote an autobiography in Russia in which he attempted to tell his side of the story. Howard states that when he was being hired by the CIA, an agent interviewing him said that he "would have to take a pay cut, of about $10,000 per year if [he] joined the CIA."[5] Howard still chose to come aboard in 1981. Early on in Howard's autobiography it becomes evident that he believed himself to be superior to the other trainees. Howard met a couple of people at training similar to him; he observes that they all shared a "dim view of the ex-military students, who for the most part, preferred to solve problems with their muscles rather than their minds."[6] Before he was even sent on his first mission, Howard began exhibiting signs of a bad team player. Howard was preparing for his first overseas mission with the CIA to Moscow, and the only thing that stood between Howard and Moscow was the polygraph test. The *A&E* network's documentary "*Spies*" claims that "the CIA has great confidence in polygraphs. It is almost a religious

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[4] "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit," *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25970.
[5] Edward Lee Howard, *Safe House: The Compelling Memoirs of the Only CIA Spy to Seek Asylum in Russia* (Bethesda, MD: National Press, 1995), 31.
[6] Howard, *Safe House*, 38.

belief in the CIA."[7] Howard failed the polygraph and was denied official assignment to Moscow. This setback, however, did not prevent him from traveling to Moscow and forging his own relationship with the KGB.

Only two years after hiring Howard, the CIA decided that he should be fired because he continuously showed deception on the polygraph. In his book about Howard, the Washington journalist David Wise states that there was a short debate at the CIA of whether it would be safe for the agency to fire Howard because of the classified information that he knew; in the end it was "decided that Howard must go."[8] In August of 1985 a KGB colonel by the name of Vitaly Yurchenko defected to the U.S. embassy in Rome. In his book *The Killer Spy,* Peter Maas wrote, "Yurchenko said that there was a former CIA officer code-named Robert who's been passing information to the KGB... he knew the man had been thrown out of the agency right before he was supposed to be assigned to Moscow."[9] The description that Yurchenko gave of Robert was very similar to Howard. Howard almost single handedly immobilized the CIA's whole Soviet clandestine operation, Weiner states that in "1985 and 1986, the Soviet/Eastern Europe division of the clandestine service had lost every one of its spies."[10] Yurkchenko's statements combined with the loss of all the CIA's spies forced the agency to accept the unacceptable; there was a traitor. The FBI was preparing to arrest Howard on espionage charges.

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[7] *Spies*, DVD, (A&E Television Network, 2008).
[8] David Wise, *Nightmover: How Aldrich Ames Sold the CIA to the KGB for $4.6 Million* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 84.
[9] Peter Maas, *Killer Spy: The Inside Story of the FBI's Pursuit and Capture of Aldrich Ames, Americas Deadliest Spy* (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 65.
[10] Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 481.

Howard, however, sensed the threat and managed to evade the FBI and escape to Europe where he would eventually defect to the Soviets.

Howard did not start spying for the Soviets until he was fired from the CIA. David Wise claims that after being fired "Howard left a note with the Russians, identifying himself as a disgruntled former CIA man."[11] Greed and revenge seem to have been the initial motives for Howard's betrayal. Wise writes that Howard's wife Mary "told the FBI the truth: Howard had a numbered bank account in Switzerland."[12] A disgruntled employee would not need a monetary incentive to hurt the company that hurt them. Howard was not interested in hurting the agency; he seemed only interested in satisfying his financial needs, and the damage he caused in the process did not seem to bother him. Weiner writes that Howard "could not possibly be responsible for more than three of the dozen deaths that had wiped out the CIA's roster of Soviet spies."[13] The chaos caused by Howard's defection diverted a great deal of attention to him and away from Aldrich Ames, a much deadlier traitor in the CIA.

Aldrich "Rick" Ames was another disgruntled agent. Unlike Howard, Ames did not wait for the agency to fire him before he started spying for the KGB. In the early 1980's Ames was on assignment in Mexico City. David Wise states that while Ames was in Mexico City his boss Francis MacDonald "thought that Rick Ames considered himself superior to everyone else."[14] Wise then goes on to state that in truth Ames "felt that his talents had not been adequately recognized by the

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[11] David Wise, *The Spy Who Got Away: The Inside Story of Edward Lee Howard, the CIA Agent Who Betrayed His Country's Secrets and Escaped to Moscow* (New York: Random House, 1988), 230.
[12] Wise, *The Spy Who Got Away*, 220.
[13] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 482.
[14] Wise, *Nightmover*, 10.

agency."[15] Like Howard, Ames showed similar characteristics when it came to his views of his co-workers at the CIA. Most employers find that issues with unsatisfied employees can be quite problematic. The problem gets much worse when the unhappy employee works for the CIA. The agency is responsible for having a system set up for monitoring such behavior in employees so gross errors like missing the deception of Ames and Howard do not happen. In both the Howard's and Ames's case the agency missed the clear warning signs.

With no one to monitor Ames, his situation only continued to deteriorate. Ames did not hide his dissatisfaction with the agency. He complained to whoever would listen, apparently his complaints fell on deaf ears. Wise quotes David Samson, Ames's colleague from the CIA as saying "Rick always argued that the Soviets were not as aggressive as we made them out to be in the cold war. He (Ames) said we still have strategic superiority, and we knew it and they knew it."[16] This could be a valid argument by Ames, but it also could be an excuse he was telling himself in order to minimize the damage of his betrayal in his eyes. Even traitors must have a bit of a conscience, and they have to find a way to convince themselves that their betrayal is not so bad. It must not have been a great challenge for the arrogant Aldrich Ames to convince himself that his treachery was somehow just or noble.

Ames finally decided to cross the line. He found an intelligence agency that would pay attention to him and make him feel important, the Soviet KGB. Tim Weiner states that Ames "was known to be an alcoholic malcontent. Yet the agency gave him access to the files of nearly every important spy working for the United States behind the iron

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[15] Wise, *Nightmover*, 18.
[16] Wise, *Nightmover*, 39.

curtain."[17] It is hard to believe that people who are in charge of keeping us safe were so careless with such important documents. It was only a matter of time before a disgruntled alcoholic agent would be tempted to cross the line. David Wise quotes Ames as saying that "In April 1985, seeking money to pay debts…in exchange for $50,000, I provided the KGB with identities of several Soviet citizens who appeared to be cooperating with the CIA."[18] Ames already believed that he was smarter than most people at the CIA; after not getting caught for spying the first time he did it, his confidence must have grown. After the first successful betrayal, selling out the CIA only became easier.

The CIA's failure to notice that there was a problem resulted in many people who were helping the CIA having to pay the ultimate price. The history channel documentary "Spies" states that Ames "gave Chavaukin (his KGB handler) every name in Moscow spying for the U.S. now estimated to be about two dozen people."[19] Many men were either imprisoned or lost their life as a result of Ames' greed and the agency's inability to police itself. Weiner writes that "it was as if neon lights and searchlights lit up all over the Kremlin, shone all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, saying, there is a penetration. Yet the CIA's leaders refused to believe that one of their own betrayed them."[20] Ames did not even seem to hide the fact that he had acquired some wealth. David Corn of *The Nation* writes that Ames "traded lives for a Jaguar and a $540,000 house."[21] Ames was living lavishly while the CIA's

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[17] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 518.
[18] Wise, *Nightmover*, 115.
[19] *Spies*, 2008.
[20] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 518.
[21] David Corn, "C.I.A. Mole Seeks Daylight: A Talk With Aldrich Ames," *The Nation,* September 11, 1995, 238.

Soviet contacts were disappearing yet no one at the CIA seemed to make the connection.

The amounts in Ames' bank accounts were rising along with the numbers of dead Soviets who had been spying for the U.S. After nine years of betraying his country to the Soviets, the CIA and FBI managed to catch on to what Ames was doing. They were at least eight years too late. In his interview to *The Nation* after his arrest, Ames tells journalist David Corn that the Russians he "identified to Moscow as U.S. agents …[were] only a small slice of the losses he inflicted upon the CIA…he is sure that he slipped the Russians leads to the identities of many, many thousands of our agents all over the world."[22] The damage Ames inflicted on the agency is astronomical. If the agency had failed to learn from lessons in history, they should have not failed to learn a lesson from their own mistakes. After Edward Lee Howard and Aldrich Ames there was no reason for the CIA not to implement better measures to prevent a traitor from having such easy access to damaging information. The agency however, continued down their old path of ignorance, and it would end up wounding them again. Apparently the damage Ames and Howard inflicted was not devastating enough and another man at the agency followed in Howard's and Ames's footsteps. Perhaps the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 led the CIA to make the mistake of letting down their guard in the Eastern European division.

After the breakup of Soviet Union, many believed that the Soviet threat was gone. Out of the wreckage of the fallen empire, a new superpower arose that proved to be just as tough an adversary for the U.S. as the Soviet Union was. Russia, the largest and most populous of the Soviet Union's fifteen republics, continued on a similar path to the

[22] Corn, "C.I.A. Mole Seeks Daylight," 238.

Soviets when it came to spying on America. The fall of communism did not end the spy games between Moscow and Washington D.C. nor did it prevent Harold James Nicholson from betraying the CIA to the Russians. Weiner states that Nicholson "had been spying for Moscow since 1994, selling the Russians files on dozens of CIA officers stationed abroad and the identities of every new officer graduated from the farm in 1994, 1995, and 1996."[23] Like the two men before him Nicholson tried to disguise his greedy motives for betraying his country. In an interview to the *Washington Post* Nicholson "said he betrayed his country to the Russians to get money for his three children."[24] Even though government officials do not get paid great amounts of money, they are paid enough for a comfortable lifestyle. Nicholson's claims that he did it for his kids are not very believable. His kids could have had a normal life had he stayed loyal to his government. Weiner states that that the CIA told the judge sentencing Nicholson that "it would never be able to calculate the damage he had done to its operations worldwide. The careers of three years' worth of CIA trainees were blighted; once burned they could never serve overseas."[25] Once again the agency had allowed itself to be fooled. Once again innocent people suffered as a direct result of the CIA's failure to discover the mole soon enough.

In all three cases the CIA's failure to respond in adequate timing led to irreparable damage to the agency. Even though it took the agency a long time to act in the cases of Edward, Ames, and Nicholson, some sort of justice eventually caught up to them. Edward seemed to have been the smartest one of the three since he was the only one who successfully

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[23] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 537.
[24] Brook A. Masters, "Convicted Spy Says He Did It For His Family," *Washington Post*, June 6, 1997.
[25] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 537.

avoided capture and defected to the Soviets. On July 23, 2002 a newspaper article in the online edition of the *New York Times* stated that Howard has "died...Mr. Howard's death remains as mysterious as his life."[26] The circumstances regarding Mr. Howards death are not clear and it is possible that he was assassinated either by his Russian handlers who had no more use for him, or by a CIA hit man. Assassination or freak accident, justice finally reached the traitor as it always does. Ames and Nicholson were more fortunate than their fellow traitor Howard. Writing about Ames, Wise states that the "court sentenced him to life in prison."[27] Weiner writes that Nicholson was "sentenced to twenty-three years in prison."[28] There is no evidence proving that Nicholson's actions have caused any individuals to lose their lives, so his punishment fits his crime. Fortunately for Ames his punishment does not fit his crime. David Wise writes that Ames "betrayed three dozen CIA and allied agents and caused at least ten of them to be executed." [29] A life sentence for a traitor responsible for ten deaths is far from the justice Ames's victims and their families deserve.

The most discouraging of all is the knowledge that these three men were able to carry out such horrific actions right under the nose of the agency responsible for keeping us safe. Greed seemed to be an initial motive for the three traitors. Later on they seem to be ashamed to admit that they were driven by nothing else but greed, so they made up excuses of being mistreated at work in order to justify their betrayal.

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[26] Sabrina Tavernise, "Edward Lee Howard, 50, Spy Who Escaped to Soviet Haven," *New York Times*, June 20, 2002.
[27] Wise, *Nightmover*, 327.
[28] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 537.
[29] Wise, *Nightmover*, 334.

There is no way we can expect the CIA to devise a foolproof method to prevent treason. We cannot, however, allow the agency to turn a blind eye when the evidence points to the fact that someone is committing treason. The CIA learned about traitors from firsthand experience because they refused to learn from the past. We can hope that after Edward, Ames, and Howard the agency has finally learned their lesson. There will always be people willing to betray someone close to them and do the unthinkable. An agency serving on the front lines of our national security should always be prepared for all possible threats. Only when they are willing to accept the possibility of an attack from within, will they be able to prevent such betrayal from occurring. Until then we are all at risk from a new Judas.

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