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TRANSCRIPT

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SUBJECT Aldrich Ames Interviewed

BROADCAST EXCERPT

ALEX CHADWICK: Next week is the first anniversary of the arrest of the CIA's Aldrich Ames for espionage. He sold sensitive secrets to the Soviet Union and then Russia and provided Moscow with the names of double agents. Many of them ended up dead.

Aldrich Ames now is serving a life sentence without parole. In his first radio interview, he talked to NPR's Martha Radditz at Allenwood penitentiary. A CIA representative monitored the interview.

MARTHA RADDITZ: Just before entering the cavernous visitors' room at Allenwood, Ames was told to remove his blue prison-issued uniform, his thick brown plastic sandals and white socks, and he was strip-searched. Yet, moments later, dressed in what looked like surgical scrubs, the convicted spy carried himself with a breathtaking haughtiness, treating the guards that accompanied him like part of a personal entourage rather than his keeper.

ALDRICH AMES: Nice to meet you.

RADDITZ: Imperially polite, even to the CIA monitor, Ames nonetheless began by complaining about his treatment.

AMES: I've been locked up in what's called "the hole." I'm in a cell by myself 24 hours a day. When I come out of the cell, I'm handcuffed. I get four one-hour outside recreation periods a week.

So, basically, the agency is pressuring the Bureau of Prisons to keep me punished.

RADDITZ: Punishment that Ames clearly believes is too harsh for his crimes. He says he's sorry for what he has done, but, it

seems, only to a point. When talking about those Soviet agents he turned in, some who were executed or simply disappeared, Ames' gaze is detached, his left hand slowly stroking, up and down, the length of his bare right arm.

AMES: I have regrets -- remorse is maybe a better word -- certainly for their families. Less for them than for, say, the people that depended on [them]. Their families, primarily. But yeah, to include them.

RADDITZ: Did you know most of the people who you turned in?

AMES: Only two or three. And certainly that makes a difference. The ones whom I identified who were personally known to me was one of two instances in which I didn't play it straight with the KGB. Much later, having confidence that nothing would happen to them, I told the KGB about them.

RADDITZ: What gave you confidence that nothing would happen to them?

AMES: I'd had a number of meetings with them. And in fact, when I told the KGB about [them] in personal meetings, I didn't make it a condition but I said, "Listen" -- ah, I guess I did condition it, 'cause I said, you know, "There's no need to do anything. I don't think you need to do anything."

I had confidence that nothing would happen to them. And nothing did.

RADDITZ: Do you know what's happened to those two or three now?

AMES: I know what's happened to one.

RADDITZ: Which one is that?

AMES: Ummm, I guess I'd better not say which one. But let's put it this way: At least a couple of them have left Russia, left the Soviet Union.

RADDITZ: In fact, Ames supplied such a tremendous amount of information to the Soviets and the Russians over the years, he is having a difficult time recalling exactly what he gave them. The FBI and CIA have spent countless hours debriefing Ames, which was a condition of his plea agreement. But they still have doubts, says Ames, that he's telling the whole story.

AMES: They've come up with all kinds of theories, you know. You know, my father was a Comintern agent and recruited me, or that my wife recruited me when we met in Mexico. They've got all kinds

of crazy theories, and there isn't anything that I can do to enforce honesty.

RADDITZ: There is one great irony about enforcing honesty with Ames, which seems to amuse him. Twice while Ames was heavily involved in spying he passed a polygraph test administered by the CIA. Since his arrest he has been given two more polygraphs to determine if he's telling the truth about the kinds of information he sold to the Soviets. He failed those tests.

AMES: This time I relaxed, told the truth and figured it would come out all right. But it didn't.

The polygraph is very subjective. And so there it is.

RADDITZ: Whatever the result of the polygraphs, Ames is convinced that the information for which he received over \$2 1/2 million did not harm national security.

AMES: No. Oh no. Not in a -- no. That's right. I mean, the analogy I made is, you know, imagine a bridge contractor, you know, who to make some money shorts on the materials, knowing, you know, that 15 people are going to crash and die someday because that bridge is going to fall down. You know, that's what I did.

RADDITZ: Why he did it, says Ames, is principally because of greed. But he said it's more complicated than that.

AMES: I had these other elements that were not particularly causes of what I did, but then tended to support them -- support. In other words, the criticisms that I had of the agency, the intelligence process, the value of -- the value of our Soviet agents' reporting. All of these things, while not -- I never viewed them as justifying what I did, at the same time, they offered an indirect sort of support.

It's a truism in espionage that an agent's motivation never remains constant. It evolves, changes, adapts. Over this eight-year period, I mean, an awful lot goes on in one's head.

RADDITZ: But Ames says he carefully resisted any serious self-reflection at the time. Fear, he said, was also absent.

AMES: If anything, I was too unfearful. I mean, I was too confident of, basically, incompetence on the part of the agency. You know, I counted on that.

RADDITZ: It's also apparent Ames enjoyed his life as a globetrotting spy, comparing himself to Britain's famous traitor Kim Philby.

AMES: My self-image was that of an agent. Now, I don't think badly of agents, myself, you see. And maybe that's the problem that maybe a fellow like Philby had, you know. People in espionage have kind of a schizophrenia about agents. They're necessary and you love 'em, but also in many cases they're despised.

RADDITZ: Ames' fascination with agents, however, stopped when it came to fictionalized accounts. When he started with his own espionage activities, he put spy novels aside.

AMES: "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" was about the last spy novel I -- Carre went downhill after that. But, you know, the modern conspiracy stuff, Ludlum and all of these guys, I can't stand it. Unrealistic. Unrealistic. Well, you know, bad stuff. Trash.

You know, I read a lot of detective stories, for example. I like that kind of thing. I don't like spy novels.

RADDITZ: With a life sentence, Ames will have plenty of time to read plenty of detective novels, a fact he seems to simply accept. He gets emotional only when talking of his six-year-old son, who he has not seen since the day he was arrested; and his wife, Rosario, who is serving a five-year sentence for her role in aiding Ames. Ames still wears a wedding band, hopes to stay married, and says the two have written a few times. But the object now, he says, dispassionately, is to learn how to live in an entirely different culture. But Ames says so far he has had no problem in prison, because, he says, his fellow inmates do not judge him by what he has done in the past.

AMES: It's what kind of person you are inside.

RADDITZ: And what's that?

AMES: You respect others. You respect the rules. Basically, you behave, you behave -- how to put it -- straightforwardly, honestly.

RADDITZ: Of all the statements Ames has made, his former CIA colleagues would certainly find that self-assessment hardest to swallow.

I'm Martha Radditz in Washington.