

C.I.A. Officer's Suit Tells Tale of Betrayal and Disgrace

Describes Fear That Gripped Agency After '94 Arrest of the Moscow Mole, Aldrich Ames

By TIM WEINER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 31 — For 20 years, Ben Fischer was a praiseworthy officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. Then, two years ago, Mr. Fischer says, a procession of rumor, gossip, hearsay and innuendo ruined his career.

His story, as he tells it in a Federal lawsuit filed on Friday, is a dispatch from the C.I.A.'s Siberia. The suit describes Washington at its worst — Kafkaesque bureaucracy, shoddy journalism, selective leaks and lethal backbiting.

It describes the fear that gripped the intelligence agency after the arrest in 1994 of Aldrich Ames, Moscow's mole inside the agency. And it asserts that Mr. Fischer was betrayed by his fellow spies, by his wife, by an old friend in the C.I.A. and by a celebrated secret agent.

Mr. Fischer turns 50 in September. He "remains a pariah among his former friends and colleagues at the agency, who remain uncertain why Fischer was banished," says his suit, which seeks the return of his career and reputation.

A C.I.A. official said on Friday that the agency could not comment on the case. But from the intelligence agency's point of view, Mr. Fischer is the betrayer, not the betrayed.

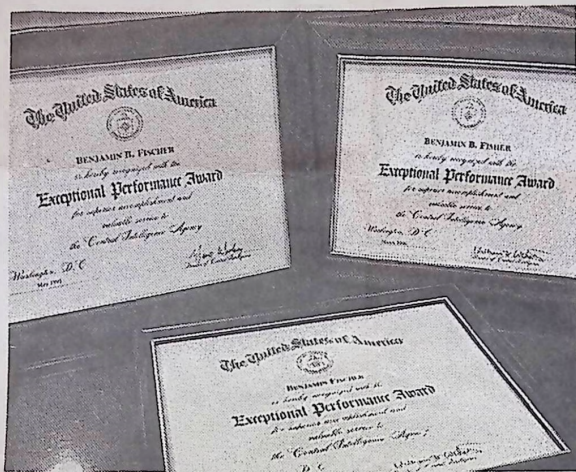
Ben Fischer was 26 years old, a budding expert in Soviet affairs with advanced degrees and impressive fellowships when he joined the intelligence agency in 1973. The C.I.A. man who recruited him introduced him to another intelligence officer, the woman he would marry. The matchmaker-officer was a mercurial former marine, David Sullivan, a man with strong views about Soviet treachery and American perfidy.

Throughout the cold war, Ben and his wife, Mary, focused on Moscow and its minions. But in 1989, like the Soviet empire, their marriage began falling apart. Mr. Fischer's suit says he learned that his wife "had begun an intimate relationship" with a highly placed superior, Steve Weber.

Mr. Weber was already a legend in the agency, a Hungarian official who defected to the United States in the 1950's, spied for the C.I.A. throughout Eastern Europe during the cold war and rose to the third-highest slot in the agency's Soviet Europe division. "Younger officers worshiped him," recalled David W. Forden, a retired agency officer.

Mr. Fischer's suit says his bosses told him that his career would be ruined if he took his wife and Mr. Weber to court. The divorce was handled quietly.

Afterward, Mr. Fischer threw himself into his work, writing and editing within the intelligence community a series of blown covert operations in Eastern Europe and



Exceptional-performance awards given to Ben Fischer by the C.I.A., which Mr. Fischer is suing in an effort to get his career back on track.

the Soviet Union. His work, the suit says, infuriated his superiors because it faulted them for the fact that operation after secret operation had failed, and agent after agent had been betrayed and executed, and no one knew why.

The answer seemed clear when Mr. Ames was arrested in February 1994. Mr. Ames later confessed to selling the agency's deepest secrets to Moscow for more than \$2 million.

Ben Fischer went from being a praised C.I.A. officer to the agency's Siberia.

But in the days after the arrest, deep fear gripped the C.I.A.

Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were swarming over the agency's headquarters, searching for evidence of treason and the spoor of a second mole. The suit says an immediate superior "urged Fischer not to tell the F.B.I. anything" and warned him that the agency was keeping track of every officer who talked to the bureau.

Mr. Fischer went ahead and talked to bureau agents, three times. The third time, the bureau showed him a copy of a letter — "the snitch fax" — and asked if he wrote it.

The fax, sent to the Senate Intelligence

committee on or about April Fool's Day 1994 appeared later in The Washington Times, the capital's politically conservative daily newspaper, which falsely described it as "a C.I.A. memorandum." The fax said Mr. Weber was in all likelihood a Soviet spy inside the agency: another Aldrich Ames.

Mr. Weber had been "in charge of all the failed espionage operations against the Soviet Union" and "all of the failed operations against the East Germans," the letter said. As a probable consequence of his treachery, "all C.I.A. agents in the Soviet Union and East Germany" had been secretly working for Moscow from 1961 onward, the letter said.

Mr. Weber, the fax suggested, had died in a prostitute's bed in Budapest — "murdered by the K.G.B." in 1993 — "to protect the secret of his role as a mole." This went on for five unsigned pages, a farrago of falsehoods and rumors with a sprinkling of half-truths, most of them aimed at Mr. Weber, who, in fact, died in Budapest in 1993.

The C.I.A.'s suspicions as to its authorship fell immediately on Mr. Fischer because of the affair his wife had with Mr. Weber. Indeed, some present and former agency officers still think he wrote the fax.

In fact, his friend, David Sullivan, who recruited Mr. Fischer to the C.I.A., eventually admitted writing the fax. Mr. Sullivan's views had long ago put him on a collision course with the agency. He was forced out of the C.I.A. in 1978 after he was caught leaking secret agency documents that said the Soviet Union had cheat-

ed on the arms control treaty.

Mr. Sullivan was the source of rumors — strongly denied by the agency — that a top aide to President Jimmy Carter was responsible for the unmasking and execution of a Soviet diplomat spying for the C.I.A.

In the 1980's, Mr. Sullivan was dismissed from posts as a Senate aide and an arms-control adviser to President Ronald Reagan. Still, Mr. Sullivan's C.I.A. credentials helped him find work with several senators, including Jesse Helms of North Carolina, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Mr. Sullivan kept in touch with like-minded friends at the agency.

Mr. Sullivan admitted in April 1994 that he had written the fax, but some of the agency's top managers remained deeply unhappy with Mr. Fischer. Officials familiar with the case say the agency was convinced that Mr. Fischer was a source for the fax, though Mr. Sullivan signed a statement saying his friend was "entirely blameless."

Mr. Fischer concedes only that he did not tell his bosses everything he told the F.B.I., which was especially interested in his former wife, by then romantically attached to a former chief of Hungarian intelligence, his suit says.

The C.I.A.'s unhappiness came to a head on April 25, 1994. The agency placed Mr. Fischer on administrative leave, suspended his security clearances and ordered him to undergo — and pay for — seven medical and psychological tests.

He remained suspended throughout 1994, and had to check in daily with a C.I.A. liaison officer to report his whereabouts. He contends that the officer told him that the agency's chief of covert operations, Ted Price, was especially angry with him for talking to the F.B.I. Mr. Price, in the meantime, was officially reprimanded for his failures in the Ames case.

Finally, a compromise was reached last year. Mr. Fischer could return to work, but he could not return to covert operations, nor work at headquarters, nor have access to classified information, nor write about the Ames case. Instead, he has a dry-as-dust assignment analyzing old cases from the cold war.

Things have changed at the C.I.A. A new Director of Central Intelligence, John M. Deutch, dismissed most of the old barons, including Mr. Price, and vowed to change the way the agency treated its people.

Mr. Fischer may have a chance to discuss the matter with senior agency officials in October, when he is to receive a prize for a paper about cold war tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, written from his internal exile.