



HIGH HONORS

Alumni Ruth Colvin and William Safire
receive Presidential Medal of Freedom

By David Marc

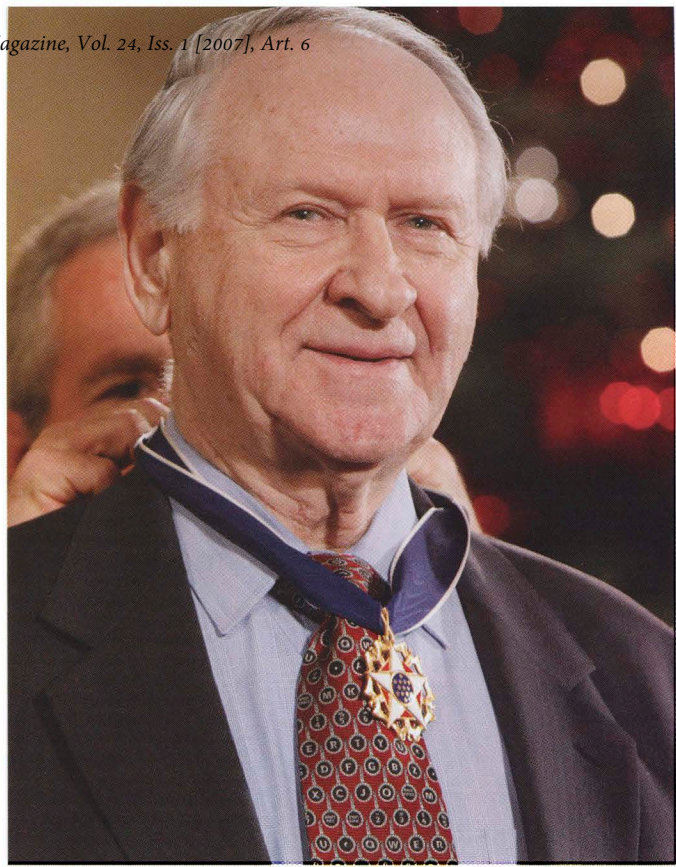
RUTH JOHNSON COLVIN '59, H'84 AND WILLIAM SAFIRE '51, H'78 were among 10 individuals awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civil honor, by President George W. Bush at a White House ceremony in December. Established by President Harry S. Truman in 1946, the medal is awarded annually to "persons who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, or cultural or other significant public or private endeavors." Both Syracuse honorees have dedicated their lives to advancing the power of the written word, each in a distinctive way.

Colvin, a Syracuse resident who lives near campus, is a literacy advocate whose efforts have had enormous international impact. A business administration major, she was moved to act by a 1961 newspaper report on census results revealing that more than 11,000 Syracuse residents were functionally illiterate. "Back then, illiteracy was not considered an American problem, but a problem in Asian and African countries," Colvin told National Public Radio correspondent Jennifer Ludden '88 in a nationally aired interview. "But this was in Syracuse—my city! I just couldn't imagine a life without reading."

Enlisting the aid of neighbors and working out of her home, Colvin founded Literacy Volunteers Inc. as a local organization, and gradually directed its development into Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), a national non-profit with hundreds of local affiliates training volunteer tutors to teach adults to read. One measure of LVA's success is the impressive

number of former students who eventually served as tutors. In 2001, LVA merged with Laubach Literacy International, also based in Syracuse, to create ProLiteracy Worldwide, the largest adult basic education and literacy organization in the world. Colvin continues to lead the fight against illiteracy as a member of ProLiteracy's board of directors. She is the author of many articles and books designed to help teach reading and language arts, including *I Speak English: A Tutor's Guide to Teaching Conversational English* (1986).

President Bush lauded Colvin for embodying the spirit of volunteerism, and for bringing so many people, including his mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, into her literacy campaign. "Ruth Colvin is a person of intelligence and vision and heart," the president said. "She has earned the gratitude of many, and the admiration of us all." Colvin, who enjoys playing golf and participating in book clubs, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of



Fame in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1993 and the Kappa Delta sorority's national Hall of Honor in 2005.

Colvin sees evidence that more than the teaching of reading is accomplished in the work of ProLiteracy. "There's no force as powerful as working one-on-one," she says. "When reading is taught, we break down all kinds of barriers—racial, cultural, economic, gender. Tutors take pride in their students' progress, and the students often say, 'I didn't know that someone with that kind of background would be willing to work with me—for free.' Friendships are formed."

Safire, a columnist for *The New York Times* for 30 years, won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary in 1978 for his coverage of corruption charges that led to the resignation of Bert Lance, a close advisor to President Jimmy Carter. A stalwart Republican, Safire developed a crisp and engaging prose style that reached across orthodoxies to gain him a politically diverse readership. He has more than a score of books to his credit, including political analyses, a half-million-word dictionary of political terms, historical novels, and several collections each of his op-ed "Essay" columns and his popular "On Language" pieces, which he continues to contribute to *The New York Times Magazine*.

After leaving Syracuse, Safire worked as a reporter, a publicist, and a speech writ-

er for several Republican politicians, notably President Richard M. Nixon, who appointed him to the White House staff. Safire's *Before the Fall* (1975; 2005, with a new preface), is an authoritative account of the inner workings of the Nixon administration before the eruption of Watergate. Safire serves as chairman and chief executive officer of the Charles A. Dana Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering achievements in science and health, education, and arts education. He is active in University affairs as a member of the Board of Trustees and the College of Arts and Sciences Board of Visitors, and he has contributed a considerable archive of papers to the Syracuse University Library. In presenting him the Medal of Freedom, President Bush called Safire "a voice of independence and principle...often skeptical about our government but never cynical about our country."

Colvin and Safire are past recipients of the George Arents Pioneer Medal, the highest honor SU bestows upon its alumni, and each has received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree at Commencement. "Ruth Colvin and William Safire exemplify the very best tradition of SU alumni engaging their communities to make a positive impact on our nation and world," Chancellor Nancy Cantor says. "We're honored that two of the 10 Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients are members of the Syracuse University family."