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Thrown back into the cold Reporter delves into clandestine CIA operations

By David L. Preston
Journal associate editor

Joe Trento, a reporter for the Wilmington, Del., News-Journal papers, was drinking his morning cup of coffee in the newsroom one Tuesday in September 1978 when Phil Milford, the police reporter, strolled by and handed him a 2-inch AP clipping from the morning paper.

"This might interest you," said Milford. "It's just a little CIA story; a CIA guy drowned on Chesapeake Bay."

Trento, whose News-Journal stories had been the first in the nation on crucial aspects of the CIA and ITT involvement in Chile and a Justice Department investigation into perjury by Richard Helms, barely was awake, let alone interested. His mind was on a job offer he was about to accept on another newspaper.

He glanced at the clip half-heartedly: John Paisley, a retired CIA analyst, was missing in Chesapeake Bay after having gone out sailing Sept. 24. OK, thought Trento, the name rings a bell, but so what? Hundreds of names had popped up during two years of covering CIA-related stories for the Wilmington papers.

But then he made some phone calls. Those early calls began an investigation that continues to this day, an investigation into the bizarre disappearance of a man who was not a low-level analyst — as the CIA ardently had insisted for months — but who may in fact have been directing a secret CIA operation to track down the theft of American spy satellite secrets in the final days before he disappeared.

If Paisley's final mission was to determine what the Russians knew about U.S. satellite secrets, then the CIA understandably would want to keep silent about it. The agency alternately lied, withheld information and refused to cooperate with the Senate Intelligence Committee, whose ongoing investigation into the Paisley case was a direct result of the News-Journal disclosures.

Trento never took that other job. Dozens of News-Journal stories over the last 15 months, he and reporter Richard Sandza disclosed that John Paisley held the highest of national security clearances, was still on the agency payroll four years after his supposed retirement, had debriefed important Soviet defectors, had been CIA contact man for the Watergate "plumbers" and worked with Henry Kissinger on the first Strategic Arms Limitation agreement before it was signed in 1972.

The stories, resulting from a combination of established sources and inventive investigative reporting, raised the possibility that the body pulled from the Chesapeake Bay on Oct. 1, 1978, identified by the FBI as Paisley's and officially ruled a suicide, in fact may not have been his. Further, two weeks before the New York Times reported it, the News-Journal reporters wrote in a copyrighted story that the CIA hid from the White House and Congress the fact that Soviet agents had obtained copies

of information that would encourage more covert CIA activities and keep them secret from Congress and public.

The bill, called the "Intelligence Reform Act of 1980," would exempt the CIA from complying with requests for information made under the Freedom of Information Act, except for requests by individuals for data about themselves.

Much of the language of the bill was drafted at the CIA. The bill was introduced a day after President Carter, in his State of the Union address, called for removal of "unwarranted restraints" on the intelligence community.

If signed into law, the bill would make it a crime for any official or former official to use classified information in making public the names of any intelligence agent, informant or source. The penalty would be a prison sentence of up to 10 years and a fine up to \$50,000. It would be a crime for someone outside the government to disclose such names "with the intent to impair or impede the foreign intelligence activities of the United States," with a penalty of one year in jail and a \$5,000 fine.

This legislation would deal a serious blow to the efforts of investigative reporters to ferret out facts about what the CIA does in the name of the American people. Significantly, Trento and Sandza found no official or former official willing to disclose classified information anyway, so a bill of this sort would serve only to encourage further CIA secrecy.

Some of the most important stories of the last 30 years have involved the CIA, yet those stories remain almost exclusively in the hands of the journalistic Powers that Be and a handful of freelancers.