

The Strange Death of John Millis

By Jamie Dettmer and Paul M. Rodriguez

The staff director of the House Intelligence Committee killed himself in a seedy Fairfax, Va., motel. But there seems to be more to the story, and those in the know just aren't talking.

No one expected it. But, then, no one ever does. A suicide almost always is baffling, and the self-inflicted death of 47-year-old John Millis, the staff director of the House Intelligence Committee, was no exception. As Republican Rep. Porter Goss of Florida, the panel's chairman, said just hours after his aide shot himself on June 4 in a rundown Fairfax, Va., motel: "There are always more 'whys' than there are answers when a tragedy like this occurs."

But in Millis' case the mystery surrounding his death has deepened — partly as a result of the reluctance on the part of Goss and others in Congress and at the Central Intelligence Agency to respond to questions about the suicide that easily could be answered.

So far, no one in authority has been prepared even to explain why earlier this summer Millis was suspended with pay while under investigation by his own committee. Even that fact was not made public in the initial statements announcing the suicide and had to be wrested from Goss, who says he will not detail the reasons for the suspension.

Both as staff director of the House Intelligence Committee and as a former CIA operations officer, Millis was a key figure in the U.S. intelligence community, one who had access to the country's most sensitive secrets, including knowledge of ongoing covert actions. So when his death hit the news, the Washington rumor mill kicked into overdrive and speculation inside the Washington Beltway mounted as reporters and intelligence officers wondered if U.S. national security had been compromised.



Troubled soul: His brother said observing Millis was like watching two trains on a collision course.

Goss and CIA Director George Tenet moved quickly to assure their subordinates and the press that no damage had been done to U.S. interests. No classified documents, for example, had been found in the motel room where Millis took his life with the blast of a shotgun (see sidebar, p. 15). And Goss insisted

that the committee probe he had ordered into Millis in no way involved any breach of national security. The suicide was a private tragedy and should stay off-limits to the press, they maintained.

Reassured that there was no big story involved in the Millis death, few newspapers have shown much curiosity. The resultant lack of coverage contrasts with the flurry of reporting that came in the wake of the 1993 death of deputy White House counsel Vince Foster, Washington's last high-profile suicide.

Speaking to *Insight*, Goss insists there is no important public-interest story behind the Millis death and speaks of the pain that would be caused to Millis' wife, Linda, and his three children and two stepchildren by commenting publicly. "The tragedy is very obviously recent and traumatic and very hurtful to the family and I see no point in talking about a personal tragedy publicly when it causes that kind of harm and grief to the family," he says.

But some congressional and CIA sources say Goss has personal reasons to want the circumstances surrounding the suicide to be kept under wraps. While acknowledging there was no harm done to national security, they argue that Millis' death is deserving of public analysis if for no other reason than it might have been avoided. They contend that the congressman mishandled Millis before the suicide and that Goss, who has ambitions to succeed Tenet at the CIA in a George W. Bush administration, has no wish for his poor management to be advertised. Tenet also

appears to have failed to act with alacrity when the first signs came of a problem with Millis.

In a bid to understand why the 47-year-old chose a lonely and horrifying end in a rundown motel on the outskirts of Washington, *Insight* has learned that Millis was beset by serious personal and professional problems. Despite the brave face he was putting on his diffi-

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culties, he was led almost inexorably to suicide, say friends and colleagues.

His brother, Ralph, a college professor, hinted at the inevitable crash that he saw coming. At a well-attended memorial service in Vienna, Va., he said in an address to the mourners that observing John was like sitting atop a mountain and watching two trains coming from different directions and set on collision course.

The first indications of trouble in Millis' life came at the turn of the year when his wife, who works at the CIA, reportedly contacted Tenet and warned that her husband was behaving oddly, even leaving classified documents strewn about their house and in the family car. Langley sources say she also claimed her husband was having an affair — with a man.

"Tenet was concerned but brushed it aside," says a well-placed source who spoke on the condition of anonymity. At Langley there was a feeling that the agency shouldn't get drawn into what appeared to be the start of an ugly marital breakup. "John was well-liked; we were all squirming a bit," says another senior CIA source. Others add that they were waiting for Millis to seek their help. "If only he had, this could all have been averted," a top CIA official says.

Prior to Linda talking to Tenet, Millis himself had contacted the CIA director to ask for his assistance with personal difficulties — but not directly. Instead, Millis inquired whether he could rejoin the agency with an eye to securing a posting overseas. Some current and former CIA sources interviewed by *Insight* say Linda was opposed to any move abroad and that her complaints were seen as an effort to scupper any chance Millis had of pulling off a soft landing at Langley.

And he needed one. According to Capitol Hill sources, his marital problems coincided with a sharp deterioration in his working relationship with Goss and he was casting around for a new job, including pitching for an intelligence advisory post in the House speaker's office.

Initially, Goss and Millis got along well. The chairman had given his staff director — Millis was appointed to that position in 1997 — great latitude, even when it came to the delicate matter of off-the-record briefings of the press. A Democratic congressman on the committee noted that Goss appeared to encourage Millis to "provide guidance" to the media and "to help steer



Millis was beset by serious personal and professional problems. Despite the brave face he was putting on his troubles, he may have been led almost inexorably to suicide, say friends.

The boss: Chairman Goss clearly was angered by Millis' high profile.

reporters in the right direction." A Republican member confirms that was the arrangement.

Later, Goss reportedly felt that Millis did too much on his own initiative and failed to keep him abreast of what he was doing. The chairman also was suspicious that his staff director may have been cutting deals with the CIA without letting him know about them. A colleague of Millis denies he was doing anything like that, arguing that Goss became irritated by, and even jealous of, the high profile his staff director was taking. "The chairman kept opening a newspaper and seeing

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What Happened in Room 29 Remains 'Top Secret'

By the afternoon of June 5, room 29 of the Breezeway Motel in Fairfax, Va., had been rented. The unsuspecting guests who checked in had no idea of what had unfolded there just 24 hours earlier but, if they had looked closely, they would have seen stains that housekeeper Nicole Carter had been unable to remove.

"If you go into that room you can still see the bloodstains on the carpet," she says. Carter, who like the rest of the staff had been told by management to keep quiet about the suicide that had taken place at the motel, started cleaning room 29 at around 9 a.m. the day after John Millis killed himself.

"It took me like two-and-a-half hours to get the smell out of it," she says. Carter recalls seeing Millis pull up in his new Ford Explorer to check into the Breezeway Motel late in the afternoon of June 4. The man she describes as a tall, slim, white guy in his fifties walked into the room and then returned to the sport-utility vehicle. As she watched him walk back to his room, she couldn't help but notice the big brown box he was carrying under his arm.

According to restaurant staff across the street, the motel is notorious for being the kind of place that attracts police activity. "We call it the 'Sleeze-way,'" admitted a bartender.

According to Fairfax City Police reports, a 911 call was received by their dispatchers at 8:12 p.m. on June 4 from a man who said he had just got off the phone with Millis. The caller told police that Millis was very depressed and had said to him, "It will be just one loud bang and it will all be over."

Police responded immediately, driving to the motel and evacuating rooms 28, 30 and 34. Officer Martin Nachtman of the Fairfax City Police later wrote in his report, "We knocked on the door (#29), but no one answered. ... Once we entered, we found Mr. Millis in the bathroom. He was obviously D.O.A. It appears that Mr. Millis committed suicide using a shotgun."

According to the report, a woman staying in room 30 heard a loud bang at approximately 7:45 p.m. Police Lt. Donald Poore cites that as the reason for the officers' decision to enter Millis' room uninvited, though as a precaution they decided to use ballistic shields, helmets and bulletproof vests.

"Once entry was gained I noticed a gun box (empty) laying on the bed and



Last stop: Millis took his own life in this low-rent motel in Virginia.

an opened box of shotgun shells on a table. A search of the room revealed a white male laying in the bathtub. It was obvious the subject had died from an apparent self-inflicted gun shot wound to the head," Poore wrote.

The report also says that a note had been left on the table in the room, although neither Michael Boone, the detective who handled the case, nor Fairfax Police Capt. John Smith were willing to comment on the nature or content of the note.

The Fairfax City Police were not the only law-enforcement agency called to the Breezeway that night. The Capitol Hill Police were asked later to attend. According to Capitol Hill Police Lt. Dan Nichols, they were asked to notify Millis' family. Nichols confirms that Millis was living with his wife up to June 4.

According to Sean Burke, an FBI spokesman, that agency also was informed of the death by Fairfax City Police on June 4. "They contacted us and we called them back and said, 'In the event that any classified documents are found, or anything else like that, please call us,'" Burke says. He adds that by the time the FBI had been called the death already had been deemed a suicide, so they told Fairfax Police they would not be involved unless paperwork was found

that fell under federal jurisdiction.

No classified documents were found in the hotel room, says Burke. "I think they might have found some in the house," he adds. However, that apparently was not reason enough for the FBI to get involved. "We have no case and we had no case prior [to Millis' death] either," Burke explains.

While the police left the scene with the body and physical evidence at approximately 4:30 a.m. on June 5, the motel staff were just about to begin cleaning up. "It was so nasty I didn't even want to clean it. It was just like blood, blood in the bathtub," said Carter, who looked in the room before the maintenance man, Oscar Bollawos, got to work.

Bollawos said there was a pool of blood in the bathtub and blood all over the ceiling tiles and floor. There even were pieces of bone in the tub and on the floor, he said. Bollawos started cleaning around 8 a.m., mopping, painting and replacing tiles. Once he was finished, Carter came back to clean the rest of the room, getting it ready for the next guests.

"I don't want to ever do that again," says the housekeeper.

Local health authorities say motel management didn't step out of line by renting the room the following day. An Environmental Protection Agency official says it's completely acceptable simply to drain a bathtub of blood and paint over bloodstains on walls and on trim. Even when a carpet is bloodstained it does not have to be removed, as long as some cleaner is applied, commented the official.

While the idea of renting a room less than 24 hours after a suicide sounds surprising, and rather distasteful, other hotel rooms across the country may be hiding different, but just as disturbing, secrets.

A report done two years ago by ABC reporter Sylvia Chase revealed that after testing 25 rooms in a variety of hotels, most of them chains, six of the bedspreads and 13 of the blankets were found to have semen and urine stains, while 18 rooms tested positive for semen in other areas, including carpets, walls and furniture.

Management at the Breezeway Motel would not comment on their cleaning standards or talk to **Insight** about the Millis death.

— James Harder