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David Wise, 88 Author and CIA expert who exposed ‘invisible government,’



David Wise in 2009. (Family photo/Family photo)

by [Matt Schudel](#)

David Wise, a journalist and author who became one of the country’s foremost authorities on espionage, writing books on the CIA, turncoat spies and whether intelligence agencies had become an unaccountable “invisible government,” died Oct. 8 at a Washington hospital. He was 88.

The cause was pancreatic cancer, said his wife, Joan Wise.

Mr. Wise was a reporter for the old New York Herald Tribune newspaper, which assigned him to its Washington bureau in 1958. He became best known for his coverage of the world of spycraft, writing more than 10 nonfiction books about the Cold War era and beyond, as well as three novels.

In one of his first books, the best-selling “[The Invisible Government](#),” written with journalist Thomas B. Ross in 1964, Mr. Wise wrote about the excesses of intelligence agencies, including the CIA and its role in orchestrated coups in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s.

“We felt very strongly that there were two governments in the United States: one in the civics texts and the other in the real world,” Mr. Wise told the New York Times in 1988. “We thought the intelligence agencies were important to our security. But we were troubled about a system based on the consent of the governed when the governed didn’t know to what they have consented.”

Before “The Invisible Government” was published, the CIA surreptitiously acquired a copy of the galleys and summoned the authors to a meeting with the agency’s director, [John A. McCone](#). Ross and Mr. Wise were told their book was a breach of national security. They were handed a list of 10 items stamped “Top Secret” and were told the information was not allowed outside CIA headquarters.

The authors said that all the information in the book came from unclassified sources and that they intended to publish their book without any changes. After some hesitation, one of McCone’s assistants then took a pair of scissors and cut the words “Top Secret” from the page, and Ross and Mr. Wise were free to go.

“I later obtained part of my file under the Freedom of Information Act, and learned that a whole ‘task force’ had been assigned to me,” Mr. Wise told The Washington Post in 1981. “One phrase stated that the agency ‘should contact such assets as it has in the press to try to secure unfavorable book reviews, and so discredit author.’ They also ran a legal study to see if they could lawfully buy up the entire first printing.”

He also noted that the CIA’s legal counsel had called the book “uncannily accurate” — in large part, Mr. Wise later said, because one of his primary sources was Allen W. Dulles, the CIA’s former director.

For more than 40 years, Mr. Wise continued to write books — including three novels — that exposed the tactics, blunders and dangers of a security state. He was “generally described,” as journalist Evan Thomas wrote in the Times, “as the best-sourced, most knowledgeable author of books on espionage.”

During the 1970s, Mr. Wise warned of the erosion of personal liberties and public accountability in his books “[The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power](#)” and “[The American Police State: The Government Against the People](#).”

Later, he chronicled the spy game's constant search for "moles," or turncoats within the ranks. In 1992's "[Molehunt: The Secret Search for Traitors That Shattered the CIA](#)," he showed how the paranoid tendencies of onetime CIA counterintelligence chief [James J. Angleton](#) ruined the careers and reputations of dozens of intelligence officers.

In "[Nightmover](#)" (1995), Mr. Wise wrote about the CIA's bumbling efforts to unearth a mole who turned out to be CIA officer [Aldrich Ames](#). Ames collected an estimated \$4.6 million for spying for the Soviet Union and Russia before he was arrested in 1994.

In 2002, Mr. Wise published the authoritative "[Spy](#)," about how mid-level FBI agent [Robert Hanssen](#) escaped detection for years as he passed secrets to the Russians. (Ames and Hanssen are serving life sentences in federal prison.)

Years earlier, Mr. Wise had tracked down another spy, Edward Lee Howard, who remains the only CIA officer to escape the United States and defect to what was then the Soviet Union. Howard, who had a history of drug and alcohol problems and petty theft, had been fired from the CIA in 1983, just before he was to be sent to Moscow.

Howard moved to New Mexico, where he simmered in resentment and was under surveillance for two years before engineering his escape from the United States in 1985. Mr. Wise was able to reach Howard through his wife — who stayed behind in the United States — and met him in Budapest on an island in the middle of the Danube River.

They spoke for six days, and the interviews formed the basis of "[The Spy Who Got Away](#)" (1988). In that book, Mr. Wise described Howard's insecurities, his anger toward his bosses — and some of the tactics he learned in the CIA, such as how to jump out of a moving car without being detected. (Hint: First, disconnect the brake lights.)

In a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction moment, Howard described his escape to Mr. Wise, saying he boarded a flight in Tucson for New York. As he took his seat, a large, rugged-looking man sat in the next seat, and suddenly Howard said he felt that everyone on the plane was staring at him.

His seatmate turned out to be the actor Lee Marvin. They began to talk, discussing Tom Clancy's espionage thriller "[The Hunt for Red October](#)."

"I asked him for his autograph," Howard told Mr. Wise.

After the rendezvous with Mr. Wise in Budapest, Howard returned to Russia, where he [died at 50](#) in 2002, apparently of a broken neck suffered in a fall down his stairs.

David Wise was born May 10, 1930, in New York City. His mother had been a singer, and his father was a lawyer.

Mr. Wise was the editor of the student newspaper at Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1951, then joined the Herald Tribune.

“He cultivated sources artfully,” journalist and author Richard Kluger wrote in [“The Paper,”](#) a 1986 history of the Herald Tribune. “The best of them, he found, were middle- to lower-level bureaucrats usually unfulfilled in their ambition and eager to share embarrassing inside information, not because of grudges they bore to the superiors or policy differences with them, but for the thrill of influencing history.”

In 1963, after five years in Washington, Mr. Wise was named bureau chief, a position he still held when the Herald Tribune folded in 1966. He was the co-author with Milton C. Cummings Jr. of a popular college textbook, “Democracy Under Pressure: An Introduction to the American Political System,” that has gone through 10 editions since it was first published in 1971.

In an interview for this obituary, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Seymour M. Hersh recalled that he wrote in 1974 that the CIA was spying on U.S. citizens, in violation of federal laws. When CIA officials complained, Hersh said, he received a reassuring call from Mr. Wise, speaking in code: “Sammy the fish peddler says you’re okay.”

“You can’t do the kind of reporting he did,” Hersh said, “without knowing people on the inside.”

Survivors include his wife of 55 years, the former Joan Sylvester, a retired general counsel of AARP, of Washington; a son, Jonathan Wise of Washington; a brother; and three grandchildren. A son, Christopher Wise, died in 2004.

In 2011, Mr. Wise published [“Tiger Trap: America’s Secret Spy War With China,”](#) which recounted the tale of a Chinese double agent, Katrina Leung, who was carrying on simultaneous affairs with two FBI agents in charge of counterintelligence operations against China. Mr. Wise completed a final book, “The Seven-Million Dollar Spy,” shortly before his death.

During the 1980s, he published three espionage novels, which he said were almost as carefully researched as his nonfiction books. He wrote of laser-beam rifles, convoy trucks built to withstand head-on crashes at 60 mph and toxins from shellfish delivered by poison darts.

“Almost all the James Bond stuff in the book is literally true,” Mr. Wise told The Post in 1981. Some of the things he discovered are “better in a work of fiction than in the real world” — such as feline spies.

“You see, somebody at the agency,” Mr. Wise said, “decided that if you wired up a cat with a transmitter, he’d be the perfect eavesdropper. Maybe sitting right on the suspect’s lap. Who’d suspect a cat? Well, as a matter of fact I would. I have two cats, and I’m extremely suspicious.”