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NBC canceled Jonestown story

By Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON — There is a startling untold story behind the grotesque murder-suicide ritual that resulted in the deaths of 911 men, women and children at Jonestown, Guyana, in November 1978. It raises the agonizing possibility that the tragedy could have been prevented.

The story goes back to the summer of 1978, when NBC News aired a segment on a violence prone cult called Synanon. Apparently pleased with that program, the NBC brass approved a hard-hitting series about brainwashing in religious cults. The first segment would be about the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, headed by a power-drunk preacher, the Rev. Jim Jones.

In the meantime, however, hundreds of threats from members of Synanon began to pour into NBC offices. Network president Fred Silverman and RCA board chairman Arthur Griffiths personally received many vicious letters from synanon supporters.

"We are going to teach you a lesson you will never forget," said one. Another warned: "Your actions place you in legal and physical peril."

NBC turned the threatening letters over to the FBI. They were released under the Freedom of Information Act to Paul Morantz, a lawyer who had helped NBC on its cult series. Two of the letters to Silverman were signed by individuals who were later arrested for planting a rattlesnake in Morantz' mailbox.

In October, according to my sources, the brainwashing project was on "the back burner." On Nov. 13 — five days before the Jonestown tragedy — NBC issued a press release stating that a show about cults was being "temporarily halted" for valid journalistic reasons. The press release continued: "NBC News has not been pressured by anyone to drop the work on this story."

In January 1979 — a month and half after the Jonestown catastrophe — NBC News president Lester Crystal wrote in Variety that the planned series on brainwashing by religious cults had never led to "threats or risks to our staff people." There were, he wrote, "never any threats made."

The fact that a segment on the Peoples Temple, in particular, had been prepared

and canceled was never disclosed. Nor did the network reveal — then or later — that it had been inundated with threats from Synanon members and supporters.

Patricia Lynch, the Emmy award-winning producer of the Synanon story and the brainwashing series, said she learned about the letters only last spring. The cancellation of the brainwashing series "came as a surprise" to her, she said. "All I was told is what I read in the November press release."

My associate Indy Badhwar has learned that NBC had about 30 hours of interviews with former members of the Peoples Temple, giving shocking details of the violence and tyranny at Jonestown — and warning of possible tragedy.

Gordon Lindsay, a California journalist who was a consultant on NBC's investigation, said: "We had the whole story on the temple. There was no aspect of that tragedy that was not known to NBC News by October." He added that a senior State Department official admitted that State was aware of "The weapons, tortures and beatings at Jonestown." Lindsay, who began investigating Jonestown in early 1978, said: "Everything I learned then came true in November."

Another source interviewed by NBC was Steve Katsaris, whose daughter Maria was once Jones' mistress and died in the mass poisoning at Jonestown. Katsaris had visited Guyana in 1977 and learned about the torture going on, and about Jones' practice of demanding signed, updated suicide notes from his followers.

"We fed all these details to the State Department," Katsaris said. He also gave it to NBC in several conversations in 1978. Katsaris said he hoped that a television expose of Jonestown would create such a furor that the State Department would be forced to intervene and avert a catastrophe.

Another NBC news source, author Jim Siegelman, echoed this feeling: "Had it aired before the Guyana tragedy, national interest would have been stepped up and Congress would have been forced to investigate."

But the show was not aired. And instead of a full-scale congressional investigation, one lone congressman, Leo Ryan, pursued the scandal on his own.