

The New York Times

Opinion

ABROAD AT HOME

ABROAD AT HOME; NIGHTMARE BROUGHT TO LIFE

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Published: April 23, 1981

Two months before the Rev. Jim Jones took his followers to their gruesome end in 1978, Jonestown had a visitor from the United States who praised the settlement and its paranoid leader. People in the United States knew there had to be a better way of life, he said, "and it is here."

As the disciples murmured and applauded, the visitor said he had traveled in Guyana on a 19th-century train, a relic of colonialism. "And then you come here. And you don't just come up to the 20th century. You're in the future all of a sudden. It's a big move. And either this is the future or there won't be any."

It was Mark Lane speaking: the lawyer-promoter who has so relentlessly exploited American assassinations. We have come to know Lane over his years of grisly self-promotion. But it is still something to hear his voice praising Jonestown - and Jim Jones giggling in the background and saying, "That's so true."

The voices of Jones and his disciples, Lane and others as they spoke in Jonestown can be heard now in an extraordinary radio program. Called "Father Cares: The Last of Jonestown," it is a 90-minute documentary produced by National Public Radio. N.P.R. stations around the country are carrying it starting this evening, with repeats later. It is quite simply one of the great achievements in the history of broadcasting.

Jones himself made it possible, by tape-recording his sermons and assemblies for years. Soon after the suicide or murder of 913 men, women and children on Nov. 18, 1978, James Reston Jr. visited Jonestown and found the tapes. U.S. officials confiscated them, but Reston got most of them back under the Freedom of Information Act: more than 900 macabre hours.

But the program is not a mere exploration of the macabre. It has important things to say about the methods of paranoid leadership and the nature of evil. It also reminds us of what a re-markable - and threatened - resource we have in public radio.

We all think we have some idea of how an egomaniac religious or political figure can lead the credulous into madness. But hearing it happen is an unforgettable lesson in the psychology of such leadership, the mixture of hate and fear and isolation and ecstasy.

"I want you to be like I am," Jones tells the congregation, his voice rising steadily to an angry scream, "I want you to become what I am, I want you to enjoy the fearlessness that I have, the courage that I have and the compassion that I have, the love that I have, the all-encompassing mercy that I am."

As the months go on in Jonestown, his voice becomes more hysterical, with passages of howling and laughter. He talks about conspiracies against him, of treason and blasphemy. And the followers' hysteria grows with his, to the point of willingness to kill or commit suicide rather than give way to the enemies said to be approaching through the jungle.

"Let the night roar," he shouts to the screaming crowd. "Let them hear it. They know we mean it. We'll kill them if they come." Like automatons, the members of the congregation say they would die for him, or kill their own children. "I would die for you right now, Dad ... thank you, Dad." And a child's voice: "I'm prepared to die for this family if I have to for freedom."

Reston has published a book on Jonestown, "Our Father Who Art in Hell." He concludes that a crucial part of Jones's hold on his followers was isolating them from reality, keeping them from any outside voices except what would support his paranoid picture.

It is in that context that Mark Lane's visit to Jonestown in September 1978 has to be seen. He arranged to represent Jones and his People's Temple for a substantial fee. He spoke of having a Hollywood movie made about Jones and the experiment. He also said, according to a People's Temple press release, that it almost made him weep to see the experiment with such vast potential for the human spirit "cruelly assaulted by the intelligence operations." Jones thanked him for confirming "the nightmare we're under."

"Father Cares" cannot conceivably have been done by any American broadcasting organization except National Public Radio. And it appears at a moment when the Reagan Administration is trying to slash public broadcasting funds and, especially, kill all national programming - which would mean the end of N.P.R.

It is impossible to believe that anyone who hears this program would want to eliminate public radio. The question is not one of ideology; it is one of civilization. Britain under intensely conservative leadership still values the ornament of the BBC. the public affairs programs of N.P.R. provide information that Americans can get in no other way - and they certainly cannot be done locally. The whole National Public Radio budget is only \$21 million a year.

This program cost \$15,000 to produce: an derisory amount by commercial standards. Without it we could not understand so well what this century has seen more than once: in Reston's words, "authentic evil."