

# Jonestown: A Virulent Madness That Still Awaits Exorcism

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## Jonestown: A Virulent Madness That Still Awaits Exorcism

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

However intensely Americans may want to dismiss it, Jonestown is a highly significant event, unprecedented in human history. It is uniquely an American event. Jim Jones is the singular product of the last 30 years of American history.

His following was a blend of disaffected blacks and whites for whom modern America provided no answer through religion or political action or education. His overwhelming success in California, building the single largest Protestant membership of any church in that state in little more than four years, dramatizes the void he filled. That success is deeply rooted in the general failure of the 1970s. Without Richard Nixon, without the Vietnam war, without the demise of the civil-rights movement or the departure of the traditional church from social action, without the current trend towards self-concern and hedonism, there would have been no Jim Jones.

The final spectacle in Guyana was horrifying and ghoul-ish, made more so by the incomprehension of the reporters on the scene, who knew only to describe endlessly the logistics of body removal. If Jim Jones was responsible for ordering the death of Rep. Leo Ryan and then for browbeating a cowardly and brainwashed following into suicide and for ordering the murder of the 180 innocent children, then he must stand as one of the great political criminals of our time.

That is how this country chose to view the events of Nov. 18 last year: a charlatan gone mad in the jungle taking his blind followers, the dregs of our society, to their death in his personal apocalypse, on the basis of imagined threats. This stance is the only palatable position for the majority of Americans who are well-adjusted in the American society of the 1970s. Madmen are to be dismissed; the dregs of our society are easily done without.

To view this disaster in such a fashion detoxifies the real horror. For many Americans, Jonestown could stand as a

metaphor for what they, in their heart, would like to see happen to the California crazies and the drug addicts and the hopelessly poor and old, especially the black ones.

But this event is more profound. I have talked to many of the survivors of Jonestown, both in the immediate aftermath in Guyana and subsequently in this country. They are far from the robots that they are portrayed to be. In their grief, they are angry, some at Jones, most at the U.S. government. For the devoted and apostates alike, Jones touched their core of belief in an age of cynicism, and thereby made them vulnerable, as most of us no longer are, to political and religious messages. I have talked to despairing parents, some wallowing in unjustified guilt over how they might have raised their children differently, parents who had found themselves powerless to crack the solid faith and commitment that Jones had instilled in their offspring. And I have listened for hours to tapes of Jones, felt his presence and magnetism, studied his unique blend of politics and religion and magic, pondered the questions of power and evil.

I've concluded that this is one of those very rare events that is beyond history. It must be dealt with not only on the factual level of who Jones was, who his followers were, what was the nature of the Jonestown mission, but also on the symbolic level.

If the symbolism of Jonestown remains obscure, so do the facts. For the latter, the U.S. government and, to a lesser extent, the Guyanese government are to blame.

In the case of the Guyanese, their reluctance to be cooperative is somewhat understandable. Before Jonestown, few Americans could tell you on which continent that tiny country was situated. Overnight, it became the heart of darkness, the site of a major political atrocity of our time. To the extent that the Guyanese government allowed Jones his state within a state, it must share in the blame. The total secrecy that the Guyanese maintain over important research materials leaves the impression that their

government is far more responsible than it may, in fact, be.

What reason does the American government have for being so secret about the valuable materials that it has kept classified for a year? In the immediate aftermath of Jonestown, the Federal Bureau of Investigation moved into the mission and crated up every document it could find, and brought them to Washington. A year later, all requests under the Freedom of Information Act have been routinely denied. More than 2,000 State Department documents and cables deal with Jonestown, and not a single document has been made public. Even the official autopsy reports from Georgetown and Dover, Del., especially that of Jim Jones, which might contain a clue as to the manner of Jones' own death—murder or suicide—are still considered American state secrets. The Federal Communications Commission holds more than 30 hours of monitored amateur radio communications between San Francisco and Jonestown that cover the last year and a half of the Peoples Temple's existence. The FCC turned down my Freedom of Information request, and I have had to sue the agency in Federal Court.

The lengths to which the government is going to prevent access to these materials, even to the point of standing the law on its head, is revealing. What is going on here?

The Justice Department, which is coordinating this exercise in secrecy, explains that a criminal investigation is in process. But criminal investigations exist for the purpose of indicting and convicting guilty parties. Who remains to indict in the Jonestown affair? All the important decision-makers are gone. There remains only one pathetic, confused, and still suicidal character: Larry Layton, who rots in a Guyana jail still waiting to go on trial. Is the whole weight of the American criminal justice system poised, ready to leap on Layton, if he is not convicted in Guyana? To suggest that Layton should bear the responsibility for Ryan's death and the chain of events thereafter would be scapegoating of the worst kind. In my view, Layton would

never survive a trial in this country. It should not be forgotten that Michael Prokes, the Peoples Temple public-relations man, was in negotiation with the U.S. Attorney in California for immunity from prosecution when he killed himself last March. For U.S. authorities to pursue the few frightened survivors of Jones' movement, keeping them in fear of federal prosecution, only invites more tragedy.

Perhaps, as many Temple survivors so fervently believe, the explanation for the U.S. government's coverup of Jonestown materials lies in evidence of governmental embarrassment or even complicity in the Guyana events. The superficial Congressional Report on Jonestown, released in May of this year, kindled this conspiracy theory, stating there was no "conclusive" evidence of Central Intelligence Agency interest in Jonestown. It did not state what inconclusive suggestions it might have discovered. This is only one of a hundred questions left dangling by the report, much of whose appendix bears the stamp "unclassified version only." Classification, as I understand it, exists only to protect secrets that relate to national security.

No institution in America, certainly not the legal or political establishment, is empowered to study the deepest and most disturbing questions about Jones and his movement. Never has there been an instance where the Freedom of Information Act was more needed to override whatever minor bureaucratic interests may exist or, worse, to disclose a major coverup.

The highest public interest rests in allowing serious study of how 1,000 Americans could willingly exile themselves, under the leadership of this shadowy and complicated figure, and go so uniformly to their death. □

*James Reston Jr. is the author of "The Last of Jim Jones," soon to be published by Times Books. This article also appears in Newsday.*