

Inquest Leaves Many Questions on Jonestown

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In days to come there will be Congressional hearings, grand jury inquiries and perhaps even trials in the United States that will overshadow the coroner's inquest completed today in this small mining village. Nevertheless, the inquest and the criminal trials of Lawrence Layton and Charles Beikman in Georgetown will constitute the repositories of much of the first sworn testimony about what happened at the Jonestown commune of the People's Temple on Nov. 18.

News Analysis

It is to these records, however flawed they may be by domestic political pressures, international pressures and the 18th century mode of criminal procedure in Guyana's courts, that later investigators will come. Though the legal record here will have no standing in United States courts and no formal acceptance in Congressional hearings, what is laid down will form a basis on which future judgments can be made.

It is difficult to distill, from the overall trauma of the deaths of 914 members of the cult, all the specific questions that remain.

Start of Plot Against Ryan

But the following are some that seem posed by the evidence at hand:

Did a plot to kill Representative Leo J. Ryan exist before his arrival in Jonestown on an inspection trip last month?

There have been some intriguing disclosures here on this matter, which also is the subject of a Federal grand jury inquiry in San Francisco.

Michael Carter, one of two brothers who survived the Jonestown deaths, testified at the inquest yesterday that on Nov. 3 he, as the radio operator at Jonestown, received a message from San Francisco alerting the Rev. Jim Jones, the cult's leader, that Mr. Ryan and another Congressman were coming to the commune with a group of reporters. The remote settlement also was kept informed by radio as to the time of Mr. Ryan's arrival at Georgetown and as to his intentions, Mr. Carter said.

Mr. Carter also testified that on Nov. 18, shortly after a United States Embassy official had used his radio to summon a plane for People's Temple members who wanted to leave with Mr. Ryan, Maria Katsaris, reputed to have been Mr. Jones's mistress, told him to cut off communications with the cult's Georgetown office and pretend there had been a power failure.

He said he carried out this command by removing part of the radio transmitter.

Harold Cordell, a cult member, has testified at a preliminary hearing in the Lawrence Layton case that even before Mr. Ryan's party arrived, Mr. Jones had suggested that somebody should shoot the Congressman and had talked about how Mr. Ryan's plane would "fall out of the sky."

Mr. Layton has been charged with Mr. Ryan's murder. In the other trial at Georgetown, Mr. Beikman is charged with killing a cult member and her three children at the People's Temple's Georgetown offices.

How many of the People's Temple deaths were in fact part of a "mass suicide"?

In the first few days after the deaths, before the bodies were removed from the jungle clearing, this question seemed to many like quibbling. But the query now takes on more serious proportions with the possibility of criminal charges being brought and with the likelihood of tangled questions of insurance liability.

Initial reports were that most of the Jonestown cultists died after drinking from vats containing a cyanide-laced soft drink. But a report by Dr. Leslie C. Mootoo, the Guyana Government's chief medical examiner, noted that several of the 39 bodies he examined in detail at Jonestown showed "small punctures in the deltoid muscle of both the left and right arms." Dr. Mootoo's report said such punctures were "consistent" with injections.

In statements to reporters, both he and police sources said they saw such marks on a far greater number of bodies, and estimated that at least 70 might have received injections.

Dr. Mootoo testified at the inquest that he also found a small vial labeled "Valium," a tranquilizing drug, which in fact held cyanide residue. He said in an interview that this suggests that some people may have accepted an injection of cyanide in the belief that they were receiving valium.

Also, a large but undetermined number of small children died at Jonestown, and many question whether they were not too young to have consented to suicide.

Stanley Clayton, a commune survivor, testified at the inquiry that during the night of the deaths, Mr. Jones, backed by security guards, pulled people from their seats and propelled them toward the vats of poison. Guards also kept people from leaving the death scene, two survivors have testified.

The police said they also found five elderly women in a "special care unit"

building several hundred yards from the pavilion who apparently were unable to walk and who apparently were brought the poison by Mr. Jones's aides. "Did they have a choice?" one Guyanan official asked. "Or did they think it was routine medication they were taking?"

Though there may never be a complete count of those murdered at Jonestown, the police and Dr. Mootoo suggest that hundreds may have been killed against their will. They base this extrapolation on the grounds that children, the elderly and the infirm may not have been able to resist taking the poison or even to know they were being poisoned, and thus can technically be said to have been murdered.

Crimes of Greed

Were there other crimes that November night, more traditional crimes of avarice and greed?

Mr. Jones was shot through the temple at close enough range to leave powder burns around the entry wound that suggest suicide. Anne Elizabeth Moore, his nurse, was shot from a greater distance with a magnum-force weapon. Her death was labeled by Dr. Mootoo as murder, and is particularly intriguing because her body was found next to an open safe.

The police have found more than one gun that might have caused Miss Moore's wound. One is a rifle that was used to attack Mr. Ryan and that can fire the type of dum-dum bullet which could have caused the massive damage done to her skull. The other is a .357 magnum revolver, said to have been Mr. Jones's personal weapon.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has completed a ballistics examination and the report is now in the hands of the Guyanese police, but senior police sources said it is not conclusive enough to identify the weapon that killed either person. No bullet was recovered from either body, they said.

Senior police officers acknowledged in private interviews that they have insufficient evidence in any of these matters to

DECEMBER 19, 1978

Unresolved

bring further charges against any Jonestown survivors. The crime scene was too disturbed to produce reliable physical evidence and the testimony of survivors too sketchy and too guarded to make a case, they said.

But even these longtime investigators concede that the need to know what really happened transcends the question of whether convictions can be obtained.

No one here suggests that the hurried, sometimes makeshift legal proceedings will provide full a explanation of the Jonestown disaster. But the investigators know that this early testimony may be more candid than the polished testimony that would be given before a House committee or at a trial in the United States a year from now.
