

The Mark of Zorro

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 29 — For most of us the sickness and death at Jonestown, Guyana, pass understanding. The more we read about the cult members' pathetic dependence on their paranoid leader, the less we understand. But there is one reassuringly familiar element in the story: the presence of Mark Lane.

Mr. Lane is the lawyer-publicist who has operated as chief ghoul of American assassinations over the last 15 years. When a leader is killed, Mr. Lane in due course appears to announce that a conspiracy was responsible — and that he knows the secret. He flushes spirits from the grassy knolls of history.

"I know who fired the fatal shot at President Kennedy," Mr. Lane wrote in a Danish newspaper in 1967. More recently he has devoted himself to the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., terming the F.B.I. "prime suspects" and co-authoring a book on the case called "Code Name 'Zorro.'"

He surfaced in the Guyanan tragedy as a lawyer for the People's Temple and its leader, the Rev. Jim Jones. Mr. Lane's role in the affair should prove fascinating to students of legal ethics, or, for that matter, of human decency. Compare what he said before the mass suicide-murders and after.

Before, Mr. Lane described the Jonestown commune as a noble experiment in socialism, targeted for destruction by a conspiracy among "American intelligence organizations" and other Government agencies. A month before the end, a People's Temple press release quoted him as saying:

"It makes me almost weep to see such an incredible experiment with such vast potential for the human spirit and the soul of this country, to be cruelly assaulted by the intelligence operations."

He flew to Jonestown with Congressman Leo Ryan and the accompanying press party. Mr. Lane told them that the people at Jonestown were peaceful, that only about 10 percent wanted to leave and that nothing more than "peer pressure" was applied to keep them there.

After, Mr. Lane told some of the same reporters that he had known drugs were used to keep commune members there against their will. He said he had known also about suicide drills in Jonestown and believed that Jim Jones seriously contemplated mass death. He called Jones a "murderer" and said his death was the "first stage" in a "master plan" of murder.

"The second stage," Mr. Lane said,

"required those who survived to condemn Jim Jones, to say he was a fascist paranoid, that it was the result of one man's actions, and then themselves to use their resources — some small group of people — to kill all the defectors and at the same time to kill public officials. . . ."

A reporter for The Washington Post asked Mr. Lane about his personal responsibility for what happened at Jonestown. He answered that concerned relatives of the commune members had known far more than he about conditions there. But Jim Jones and his lawyers had tried to discredit the worried relatives when they asked for an investigation, the reporter noted. Mr. Lane said: "If they weren't crazy, they wouldn't have been discredited."

Under the lawyers' code of professional responsibility, a lawyer is not obliged to keep the confidences of a client who discloses an intention to commit future crimes. So Mr. Lane may have some more explaining to do in investigations of Jonestown, civil damage suits or bar proceedings.

The larger question is how such a creature gets the attention that Mark Lane does in this country. He has sold thousands of books and assassination bumper-stickers, he commands high lecture fees, he testifies at Congressional hearings, he appears on television talk shows, he gets publicity for an organization that he created, the "Citizens' Committee of Inquiry."

If another Mark Lane were passing judgment on these activities, he would surely sense a conspiracy to sow doubt and division in the country, to encourage morbid obsessions. I have always assumed that he was just a pitchman with an exceptional talent for preying on the gullible. But there is of course the possibility that he believes his own visions.

In any event, it is time for the decent people of the United States to tune out Mark Lane. It is time for some soul-searching on the part of talk-show hosts and editors and politicians who have allowed themselves to be vehicles in his promotion of conspiracy theories — and of himself.

Mr. Lane's book on the Kennedy assassination, "Rush to Judgment," was an attack on the Warren Commission. On the last page he wrote:

"The readiness with which its findings were accepted I believe to have been symptomatic of disease. Perhaps it was like that collective illness which anthropologists have observed to afflict tribal societies after the death of the chief."

A country that goes on listening to the likes of Mark Lane is longing for witch doctors.