
Our Rational Age Fails
To Understand How Many
Yearn for the Absolute
In an Uncertain Era

The Lure Of Our Many Cults

By Henry Allen

IN AN AGE in which everything was permitted, yet little seemed real, the Rev. Jim Jones promised a refuge.

At his Peoples Temples in California and in the jungles of Guyana, little enough was permitted — disciples surrendered property, privacy, logic, freedoms. And in a blaze of certainty lit by Jones' charisma, paranoia, deceptions and power lust, they found the final reality — death.

"They were smiling . . . they were genuinely happy," said Mark Lane, a lawyer for the cult who fled into the jungle just before the mass suicide began with the pouring of cyanide into babies' mouths.

Literate, adult Americans, supposedly im-

munized against such madness by 20th century education and science — these children of the Enlightenment — watched their own children, their spouses and friends die in foaming convulsions, then waited — even happily — to fall dead in their turns. Only they could understand whatever message they tried to send with their deaths, so it died with them. But they were already long past appreciating this savage paradox.

Genuinely happy. If Lane is right, here lies the real terror for the rest of us.

All week, in the aftermath, historians groped for precedents, psychiatrists for motivations, community leaders for courses of action. How could this have happened? Could it happen again?

Except for the smugness of hindsight offered by foes of the mind-control cults that have emerged in the last decade, there are no simple answers. Instead, a variety of explanations rises out of fact and theory. None suffices in itself. But taken together, they begin to show how the madness of one man could converge with the spirit of an age in upheaval to weave a doomed nexus out of strands ranging from the most ancient of human instincts and customs to the physiology of the mammalian brain.

Allen, a Washington Post staff writer, has long followed developments in American cults.

The comfort, here, is cold indeed. For all that it was bizarre beyond thinking, we don't need a Jim Jones to invoke the supernatural to explain the immolation in Guyana. It was a human — frighteningly human — experience.

◆
IT HAS happened before. Scientists and historians rushed to sweep the carnage into the corner of anomaly, but suicides — even mass suicides — for gods and principles, right and wrong, have occurred in various contexts throughout history.

On April 15, A.D. 73, nearly 1,000 Jewish defenders of the fortress Masada killed themselves rather than be taken prisoner by the besieging Romans. According to Gibbon, the 4th and 5th centuries were marked by the willful martyrdoms of the Donatists, who in seeking heaven "frequently stopped travelers on the public highways and obliged them to inflict the stroke of martyrdom by promise of a reward, if they consented — and by the threat of instant death, if they refused to grant so very singular a favor."

In the 13th century, the fervor of the Albigensians and Cathars (heretical sects in

Southern France) to avoid the material and seek the spiritual led to numerous deaths from self-willed starvation. A. Alvarez, author of "The Savage God," writes that after the conquest of the New World, "treatment at the hands of the Spanish was so cruel that the Indians killed themselves by the thousands rather than endure it . . . In the West Indies, according to the Spanish historian Girolamo Benzoni, four thousand men and countless women and children died by jumping from cliffs or by killing each other."

In the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, the romantic rebellion turned suicide into a fad. After the appearance of Goethe's novel, "The Sorrows of Young Werther," Europe was swept by Werther-like suicides. Before the end of World War II, thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians killed themselves en masse after island battles rather than be dishonored by defeat or surrender. Vietnamese Buddhists registered political protests by setting themselves afire in the 1960s. In 1970, about a dozen French students killed themselves as a political gesture.

But these acts, however irrational, come within the pale of understanding. What promise of heaven, or threat of disaster or

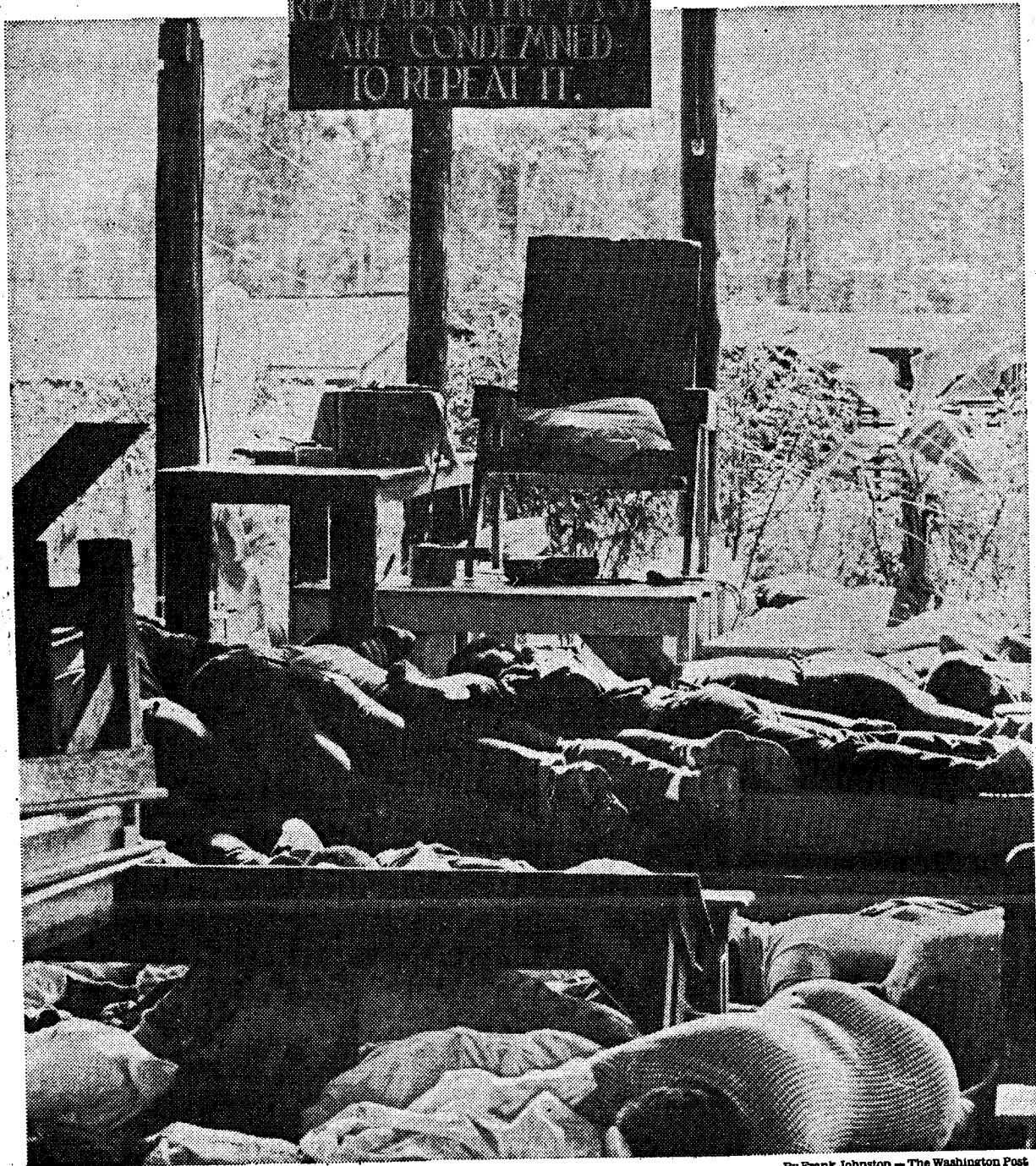
dishonor, could have tempted the Peoples Temple disciples?

We were informed that our situation had become hopeless and that the only course of action open to us was a mass suicide for the glory of socialism. We were told that we would be tortured by mercenaries if we were taken alive . . . Life at Jonestown was so miserable and the physical pain of exhaustion was so great that this event was not traumatic for me. I had become indifferent as to whether I lived or died.

— Deborah Layton Blakey,
former member of the
Peoples Temple,
describing a suicide
rehearsal.

There were no mercenaries, of course. There was little "situation" to become hopeless. The Peoples Temple was hardly known outside California, much less under attack, except for some West Coast media probes. Jones had sizable political clout — he was head of the San Francisco Housing Authority — and a treasury that may have held millions of dollars. He and his followers had everything, by conventional wisdom, to live for.

THOSE WHO DO NOT
REMEMBER THE PAST
ARE CONDEMNED
TO REPEAT IT.



By Frank Johnston — The Washington Post

C1

But conventional American wisdom has never come to terms with the spiritual upheavals and cult phenomena that started growing out of the disarray of American society a decade ago. As a secular society, we've ignored the power of messianic personalities and their persuasive techniques; and we've forgotten the terrible charm of absolutism — or paranoia — in an age of uncertainty.

"What you have to remember is that leaders like Jones always believe in what they're doing — it's a divine calling," says Syracuse University anthropologist Agehananda Bharati. "Once a person is embarked on this path, it will lead to a power quest. What increases the power is the dependence of followers. There's a point of no return, a snapping point. Suddenly you need more and more power to be sure of yourself — and the quest becomes linked to the divine calling."

"There are cults and cult leaders all over the world, and always have been. In the South Pacific we have the cargo cults [whose members believe in the imminent arrival of shiploads of goods and money, if they can only have complete faith that it will happen]. In India there are gurus such as Sai Baba, who has 10 million followers. But often, in other cults, something comes along to slow the momentum of the power quest. People object, for instance. Jones managed to escape that by taking his followers to Guyana where there was no media, no possibility of dissent or investigation."

The divine calling. Like most messiahs and prophets, Jones, a minister by profession, seems to have started with a vision.

Around 1961 he saw a holocaust consuming Indianapolis, where he was living. (In "The Varieties of Religious Experience," William James writes of "the psychopathic temperament in religious biography. . . . The subjects here actually feel themselves played upon by powers beyond their will.") A few years later, in the archetypal pattern outlined by sociologist Max Weber, Jones had gathered a group of followers and led them to a new land in Ukiah, Calif. He established a multiracial community which quickly became a political force in Mendocino County. In 1971 he bought his Geary Street temple in San Francisco, then expanded to Los Angeles. He preached socialism and practiced faith healing, praised Huey Newton and Angela Davis and expanded his apocalyptic vision by predicting a fascist takeover of America.

Being so sure of his ends, Jones had no doubt about means, a philosophy he passed along to disciples.

ACCORDING to cult defectors, Jones gained an estimated following of 20,000 by staging faith healings in which the "tumors" which were passed by his subjects were actually chicken organs. He staged a fake assassination attempt in which a shot rang out, blood appeared on his shirt, and then he pronounced himself healed, warning witnesses to say nothing of what happened — all the better to further their perceptions of the outside world as populated by those who could not understand, by "them."

As in all hermetic sects, there were levels of understanding. Those who suspected fraud justified it on the ground that it brought more recruits to the truth of Jim Jones. Jones claimed to be the inheritor of the spirit of Lenin, Jesus, Buddha and the brotherhood of man, to be God, some defectors recall. His means were beyond question.

See CULTS, Page C4

clear. Traditionally cash customers, the Chinese seem somewhat more willing to engage in credit arrangements now. But they hope to offset new imports by stepping up their exports — textiles to the United States, for example, and a variety of industrial products, arts and crafts or other goods to other nations.

Exchange Agreement

A SIGNIFICANT accomplishment of the Bergland mission, too, was an agreement engineered by assistant agriculture secretary M. Rupert Cutler for exchanges of scientists and students; and for sharing of plant seeds, biological pest control technology and animal breeding and disease treatment information. The exchanges will begin next year, and may lead to China's developing an agriculture education system adapted from the America land-grant college model.

Political rhetoric took a definite back seat to hard-nose economics in the talks the Bergland delegation had with the Chinese. The Chinese leaders habitually referred to the lack of "normalized relations" between the two nations, and hinted that contacts would increase as soon as the United States grants diplomatic recognition, but there seemed to be more form than substance to the statements.

The Chinese turned out to be far less doctrinaire and monolithic than they have sometimes been pictured, and were occasionally willing even to poke gentle fun at their own party line.

At one commune, where the Bergland delegation was getting the standard lecture extolling accomplishments of the workers, the commune director went through the usual litany: "By following the teachings of our late beloved leader, Chairman Mao, and by learning from Tachai (a model agricultural commune used as a national model), and by following the further teachings of Chairman Hua and since the obstructionist policies of the Gang of Four have been repudiated, we have succeeded in increasing our output by 20 percent over last year."

"Of course," he added with a smile, "the weather was a lot better this year, too."

for the taller population and savings due to smaller size people were computed. The resulting increased cost of the

tion, author of "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism."

Like many of the cults and esoteric religions which began attracting Americans in the late 1960s, Peoples Temple had lost a large part of its membership by 1978. As the upheavals of a decade ago have eased in the somnolent '70s, religious refuges and revelations have lost allure.

It's hard to remember, now, that the turn of the decade was called the third "Great Awakening" by a number of scholars — the first two having been religious revivals in the early 18th and 19th centuries.

Then, as in the late '60s, the nation was swept by proponents of ecstatic religion, in which converts were invited to sense God first-hand, rather than through the intermediaries of theology and sacraments.

The 1960s movement had two stages. In the first, the enemy was not Satan and sin but establishment reason and technology, along with the reality they described. Heroes included British psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who argued in "The Politics of Experience" that schizophrenia was as valid a reality as establishment "sanity." And there was humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow, who advocated the cultivation of the sort of "peak experiences" which mark the lives of saints and prophets.

American spiritual life, often a drab business of church suppers and bingo games, exploded with alternatives: Tibetan Buddhism, the mysterious wisdom of Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan, meditation, glossolalia, primal screaming, biofeedback, and Zen in the art of practically everything. LSD and other psychedelics became anodynes for the situation once described in graffiti in a Boston men's room: "Reality is a crutch."

In short, everything became permitted, but reality — which religion ultimately defines — became very unsure indeed. The problem was that this movement, rather than attacking a well-entrenched establishment, was largely a symptom of its collapse in the storm of Vietnam, racial strife, generational enmity and rapidly shifting mores. It publicly played itself out in Haight-Ashbury, where in 1967 a "summer of love" turned into a nightmare of rape and drug addiction. Then the Charles Manson murders in 1969 showed that LSD revelations could lead to lethal paranoia and messianic delusion.

So when the second stage, the so-called mind-control cults, began to appear with many of the popular esoteric

trappings but none of the chaos, the change was often greeted with relief.

In the mid-'60s, the Hare Krishna cult arrived in America. Far from "doing their own thing," cult members dressed in identical robes, men shaving their heads except for a top knot. With drums and finger cymbals they chanted for hours on street corners and harassed passersby for contributions. Like so many other cult members, they always looked tired, undernourished and ecstatic.

In 1968, David "Moses" Berg founded the fire-eyed Children of God to preach salvation in the face of the earthquake fever that swept the hip West Coast psyche that year. In 1971, a 13-year-old Indian named Guru Maharaj Ji arrived

Examples of such movements include the Plains Indians' Ghost Dance movement in the late 19th century, the Boxer Rebellion in China, the South Seas cargo cults, and even the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

As Wallace explains it, a prophet has one or several hallucinatory visions, such as Jones' vision of a holocaust. He preaches his revelations to people "in an evangelistic or messianic spirit." Then "converts are made by the prophet. Some undergo hysterical seizures induced by suggestion in a crowd situation; some experience an ecstatic vision in private circumstances; some are convinced by more or less rational arguments . . ." The prophet changes his message to fit his needs. "In instances where organized hostility to the

The next morning his wife helped their seven children jump from their eleventh-floor hotel room, then followed them. And Jim Jones abandoned America, hurling back the threats of assassination and suicide that became fact last week.

"The unnatural passivism of [cult] members," is actually "a carefully muted aggressiveness," write Katherine V. Kemp and John R. Lion, professors of psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

The cults have flourished, too, because the American establishment, founded on rationalism and Lockean tabula rasa theories of the mind (in which mankind is seen to be infinitely educable, with no inborn predispositions) is extremely reluctant to admit that human beings may be innately susceptible to certain persuasive techniques. In "Battle for the Mind" and "The Mind Possessed," British neurologist William Sargant has cited laboratory evidence gathered by Pavlov and his own observations of acute combat stress in World War II as part of a hypothesis that stress, if strong enough, "can produce a marked increase in hysterical suggestibility so that the individual becomes susceptible to influences in his environment to which he was formerly immune." Says anthropologist Bharati, "It can happen to anybody."

Former cult members recite a litany of stress they underwent: sleep deprivation, hunger, constant haranguing, and in the case of Peoples Temple, public beatings and threats of death.

Psychiatrist Lifton notes: "Mind control comes when you have total control of communication in an environment; when you have manipulation inside the group, such as constant self-criticism and confessing; and manipulation of individual guilt."

IF SARGANT is right, we are innately and physically susceptible. Ethologist Konrad Lorenz brings it into the realm of instinct in "On Aggression." Once instilled with the sort of paranoia Jones purveyed, the follower is driven by "militant enthusiasm by which any group defends its own social norms and rites against another group not possessing them . . . One is ready to abandon all for the call of what, in the moment of this specific emotion, seems to be a sacred duty."

So lured by security and order, betrayed by physiology

and instinct, cult members can be willing to follow their leaders even into death.

Some cult observers maintain that it is largely those who are mentally ill or close to it who join the cults. Dr. John Clark, a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, has estimated from his studies that 58 percent of those who join cults are schizophrenic, either chronic or borderline. But he adds that 42 percent of those he examined were neither ill nor damaged.

In any case, we are left with the hideous vision of smiling disciples drinking cyanide. We can explain it away as a terrible accident, saying that the cult members were duped into thinking the exercise was just another rehearsal. We could claim that the cultists were forced to kill themselves. But that does not explain the smiles, the failure of more members to flee, the dying with arms linked with fellow disciples. In fact, a survivor recalls one woman objecting, only to be shouted down with cries of "traitor."

UCLA's Ungerleider speculates that "they may have killed themselves willingly out of what Anna Freud called 'identification with the aggressor.' It's a defense mechanism in hopeless situations, when the ego is overwhelmed. It explains why some Jews would actually help each other into the gas chambers in concentration camps." Even when the dying began, and panic twitched through the camp, Jones could keep the mad momentum going by insisting that they must "die with dignity."

We might do well to consider that they died knowingly, believing that death was beautiful, as Jones kept chanting into his microphone. Indeed, if they shared his paranoia, his vision of the holocaust, the fate that awaited the community after the murder of Rep. Ryan was far worse than death.

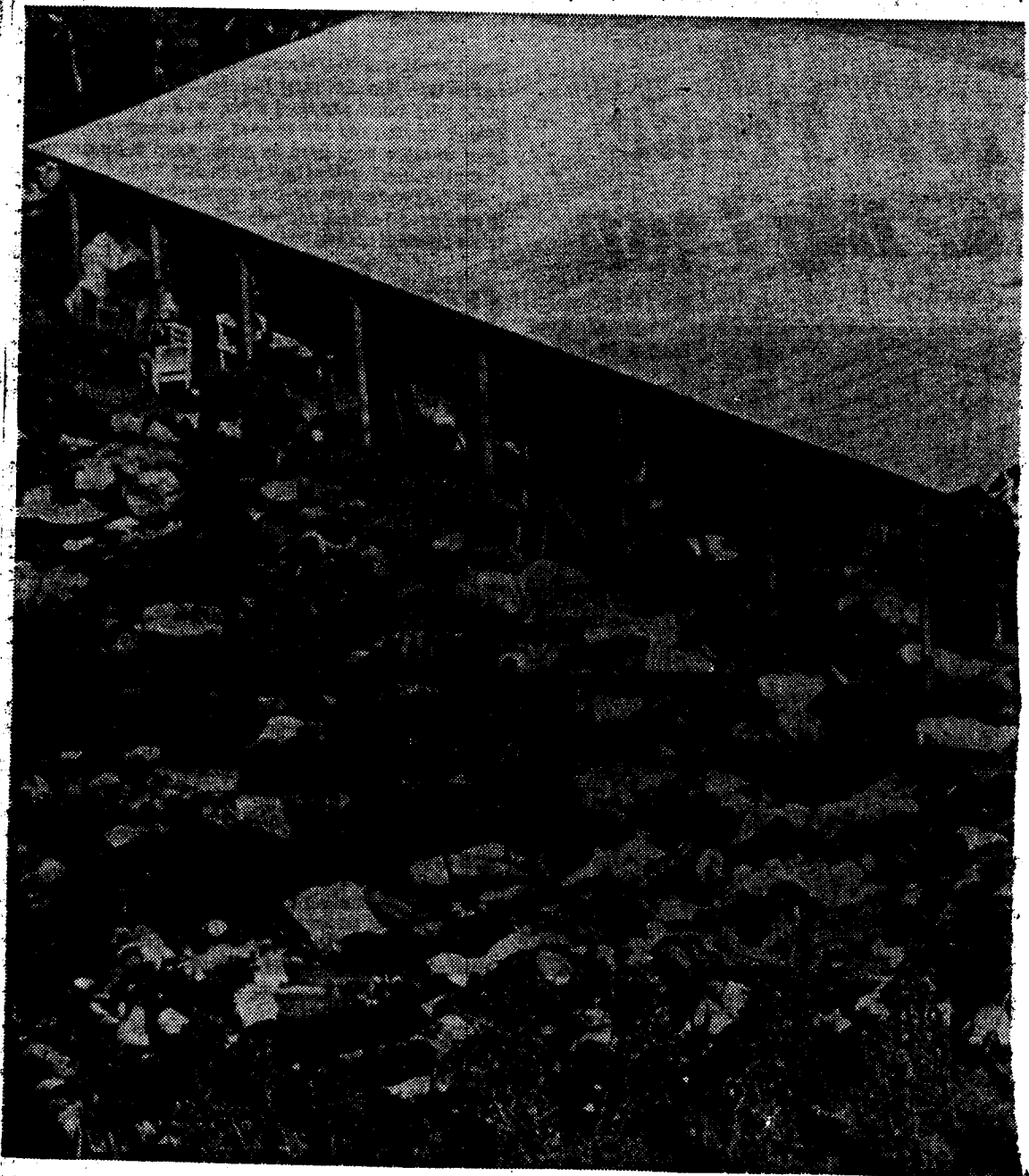
In the terms of French sociologist Emile Durkheim, they had preached an "altruistic" suicide, for the glory of socialism. But when the time came, it was merely "anomic" — self-destruction in the face of the disintegration of all that was meaningful, a universe which existed only in their minds.

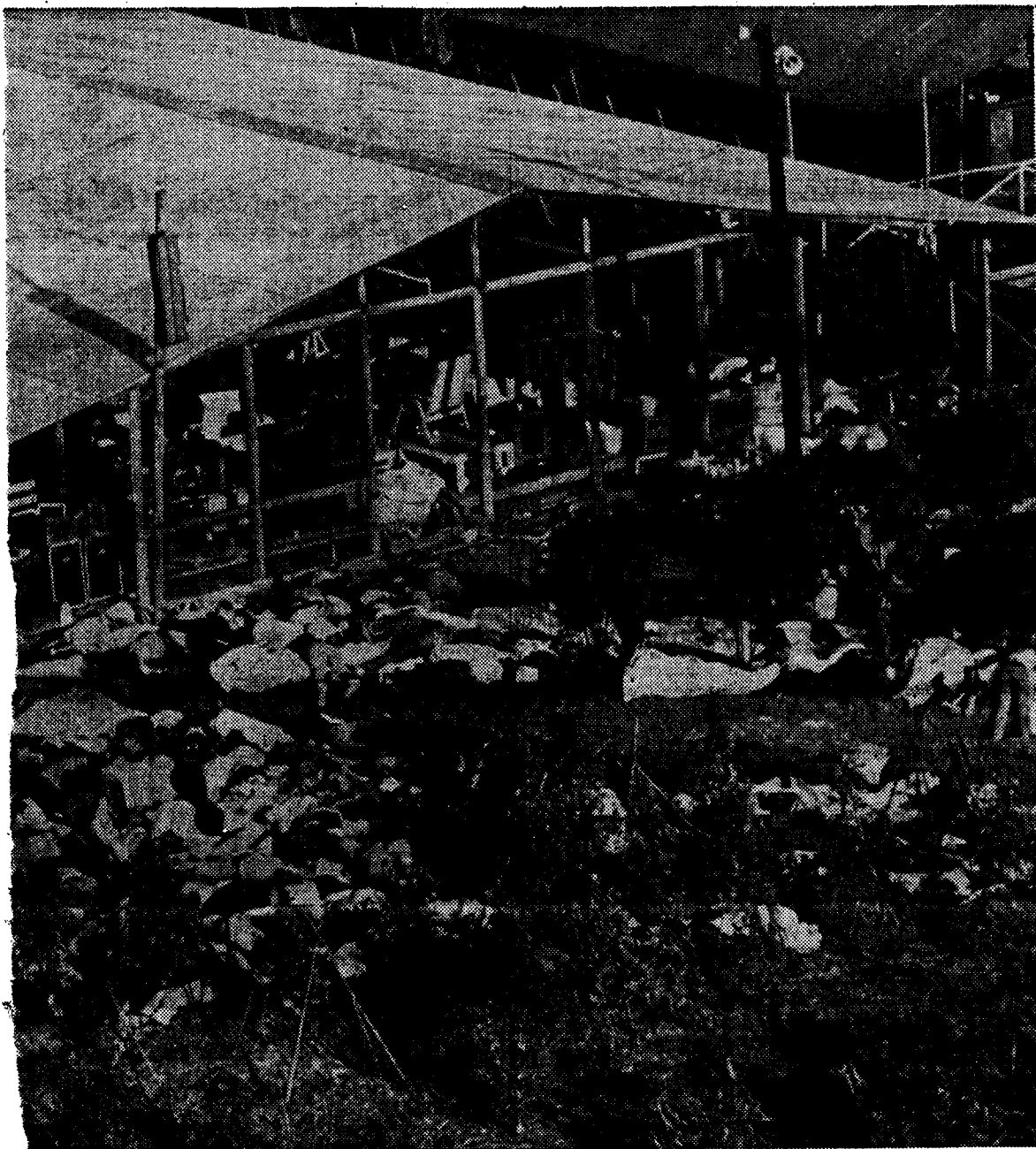
To his followers, Jones was a god whose power they could take into themselves merely by obeying him. It may have seemed, as they drank the cyanide, that for one moment they would share in ultimate power — the power of life and death. If, in the falling and convulsions, that moment ever came, no one will ever know.

C2

Sunday, November 26, 1978

THE WASHINGTON POST





By Frank Johnston — The Washington Post