

Meg Greenfield

Jonestown: 'The Dark Impulses That

I thought of one of those automatic ceiling sprinkler systems that go on of their own accord at the first sign of fire. The strange and terrifying news had hardly begun to come in from Guyana when I and the people I know and the international secretariat of commentators and busybodies and the cranks who call in to the late-night radio shows started trying to douse the flames in familiar and reassuring explanations. First would come the requisite cosmic sigh about how incomprehensible were the ways of man. And then would come the sly suggestion that the events weren't really so incomprehensible after all. Whereupon the speaker would proceed to interpret the Jonestown horror in a way that could best be summed up: I told you so.

Accordingly, it was a great week for the anti-left right, the anti-system left and the anti-clerical of every political persuasion. The anti-clerical interpretation vaguely, but lovingly, put forward by skeptics and committed nonbelievers holds that this—carnage, hysteria and insanity—is what you get when you start down that leap-of-faith, suspension-of-reason road to religion. Crazy Reverend Jonesism is argued to be but a priest's step or two away from much, if not most or all, of religious experience. Under this construction, the irrational acquiescence of Jones's followers in their own mortification and doom is viewed as evidence of the dangers inherent in any form of spiritualism.

The anti-left interpretation has been made almost too easy to be sporting. Beans and rice and interracial harmony and blather about socialism and

communal living and endorsements from liberal-left politicians and involvement of people like Huey Newton and Angela Davis and Mark Lane. I calculate that the political backlash on this is going to get stronger, not weaker, as time goes on—never mind that the derangement involved here was political only in the most superficial sense. The wages of interracial living is not mass suicide and murder.

In fact, I would turn the thing around and say that the left politics, from what I have read, seems to have been less a source of the bizarre behavior than a rationalization of it. People who were submitting to terror and indulging some masochistic fantasy with their suicide drills and beatings and the rest, somehow justified it with a wash of sentimental, cockeyed class politics. Only ponder the intellectual confusion of those who could say in extenuation of a system characterized by physical privation, violence and abuse that, on the other hand, the medical care was good.

The anti-system implications have been indirectly drawn from the beginning. Practically the first voice I heard from Guyana was that of lawyer Mark Lane, just out of the jungle, expounding his theory to a radio interviewer that it was a *bleak comment* on life in the United States that these people would have chosen to go to Jonestown in the first place. In Jonestown, at least, they were free from drugs and crime in the streets . . . and so on. A variety of other observers, including newspapers abroad and, of course, the ever-ready Tass, have pitched in to help explain along these lines, citing sexual prom-

iscuity, religious battiness and the general decadence of the American way of life as the true nub of the matter.

The confounding, inconvenient fact is that none of these interpretations will stand, any more than the related single-premise theories concerning mesmerization, brainwashing and similar mechanical processes will. The Guyana horror was not imposed on its victims by an external force or process. It was also not the inevitable or even probable outcome of dalliance with religion or left-wing politics. It's not where you necessarily come out if you go in those other doors.

For one thing, the radical politics and religious pretensions and passions that went into the adventure were inextric-

Lurk in Every Private Psyche'



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cably mixed—and in a familiar way. The Guyana movement has a wealth of counterparts in the society. And all those various "armies" and "churches" and terrorist outfits and sects that have burgeoned on our political/cultural landscape in fact have this in common. They provide a hash of combined theology and manifesto for their disturbed communicants.

Why then do we insist on trying to construe the various shocks and terrors that light up the sky as the predictable result of somebody-or-other's politics or faith? Well, at the simplest, most obvious level, it makes the night less frightening for the rest of us if we can attribute grotesque behavior to ordinary, manageable causes. And it justifies our

own behavior and beliefs as well, sparing us along the way from having to face up to a world out there that is not conforming to the model with which we have become comfortable. I thought, as the 15th anniversary of John Kennedy's death went by in the week of Jonestown, of that Friday night when a bunch of us—reporters—waited on the White House lawn for the arrival of Lyndon Johnson, back from Dallas, and heard the assorted rumors of who the Kennedy assassin had been. I remembered above all the almost frantic insistence that it must have been a "right-wing nut". Our sense of order already deranged, was now in danger of being shattered altogether.

So we tame and domesticate the horror by making it fit our prejudices and predilections, and we justify our own way of thinking about things, and we impose a certain consoling, if deceptive, order on the unsettling chaos of events outside us. But I think there is something more at play. I think we don't want to acknowledge that the aberrational behavior we have witnessed is at least dimly familiar to us in an individual, human way, that in some respects it represents not an antithesis of our own behavior, but rather a parody or caricature of it.

The desire to follow the mystique of a charismatic leader, the blindness and self-deception and unyielding resistance to evidence that our heroes may be weak and our commitments misguided and crazy, the fantasy of escape into another place or into the toll-free world of total obedience and repression of self; the reversion to infantilism ("Mother! Mother!" Jones is said to have cried out at the end, the contained, yet real, promptings to violence we have all felt—these are the things the Guyana nightmare put in stark relief.

They are not the vices of some cult or the end product of some political position. They are the dark impulses that lurk in every private psyche, the impulses whose control and channeling into constructive humane acts is the very definition of civilization. What made the Jonestown affair such a disturbing metaphor and called forth so many diversionary "explanations" was its reminder that the jungle is only a few yards away.

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