Meg Greenfield

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.

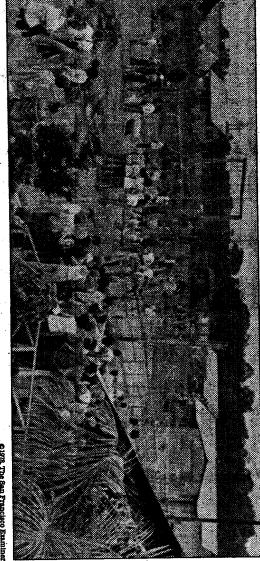
The anti-system implications have been indirectly drawn from the beginning. Practically the first voice I heard from Guyana was that of lawyer Mark Lane, just out of the jungle, expounding his theory to a radio interviewer that it was a bleak comment on life in the United States that these people would 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 *religious pretensions and passions that 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 went into the adventure were inextri-

in Every Private Psyche



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

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

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

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

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

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

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