

State Dept. Faulted on Jonestown Warnings

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The State Department was so preoccupied with bureaucratic niceties and legalistic constraints that it was virtually blind to warnings of imminent danger at Jonestown last year, according to a study commissioned by Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance.

The study found that some of the most prized diplomatic attributes—caution, circumspection and tact—ultimately emasculated what few efforts were made to intervene at the Peoples Temple commune in Guyana before the murders and mass suicide there last November.

"The single most important substantive failure," the report said, occurred last June, five months before the Jonestown tragedy. After receiving repeated allegations concerning concentration camp-type conditions and mass suicide threats at Jonestown, the U.S. ambassador in Guyana cabled Washington June 6 for authorization to seek Guyanese intervention.

But the cable was so cautious and so couched in legalese that "its intended import was obscured." The request was rejected with a "simplistic reply" from Washington, the report said.

A month earlier, the report contin-

ued, the State Department "all but ignored" a petition from a Peoples Temple defector, Timothy Stoen, in which he, too, spoke of possible mass suicide. "I wish there were some way to convince you that the situation in Jonestown is desperate," Stoen wrote. There exists "a threat so chilling as to be incomprehensible to the average decent person."

Last Nov. 18, Peoples Temple members murdered visiting Rep. Leo Ryan (D-Calif.) and four others accompanying him on a Jonestown inspection. More than 900 Temple followers then

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died—most by consuming a cyanide poison mixture administered at the orders of the Rev. Jim Jones, the Temple leader.

The State Department study was prepared by two retired senior Foreign Service officers, John Hugh Crimmins and Stanley S. Carpenter.

Because of the department's failure, they recommended that the department "undertake urgently a thorough high-level review" of the government's abilities to cope with problems Americans may have abroad.

The report tracks State Department handling of Jonestown from the time emigration first began, largely from California, to the day of the tragedy. During the year preceding the kill-

ings, the State Department and the U.S. embassy in Guyana had been showered with complaints from Peoples Temple members and relatives about conditions at Jonestown, on the one hand, and equally strenuous charges on the other hand, by Temple leaders and Temple lawyer Mark Lane of harassment directed at the Temple.

By May 1978, officials had heard unverified reports of people held in bondage, arms smuggling into Jonestown, threats of mass suicide, a druged appearance of Jonestown residents and the mental instability of Jones himself.

Numerous "constraints" then seemed to take over and limit the department's flexibility, the report said. Among them:

- Consular officials in Guyana

wanted to tread cautiously because they were dealing with two competing groups of American citizens, each of which had enlisted prominent people, including public officials, in their cause. The Peoples Temple also had high-level friends in the Guyana government.

- Attempts to verify the complaints were hampered by the perceived need, under the U.S. Privacy Act, to notify Jones in advance of inspection trips and of the names of Jonestown residents to be interviewed.

- Restrictions on U.S. surveillance of Americans overseas prevented the use of standard intelligence-gathering methods to try to find out what was happening in Jonestown.

- The Freedom of Information Act, which often allows public inspection of confidential government documents, induced officials to be circumspect in

their cables and memos, for fear that
particular in the Jonestown area
might someday see them. The
Department, the report said, was
difficult to get information from
any informant they could not
absolutely verify by other means.
The report also said that the
Department was unable to verify
the information in the cables and
memos by other means.

In drafting the telegram, the am-
bassador consciously used the terms of
legal terms, using as much of the
cautious language as he could. Assuming
that the telegram would get into the
hands of the Peoples Temple in one
way or another and having specifi-
cally in mind the Freedom of Infor-
mation Act, the ambassador prepared

the telegram with the purpose of hav-
ing it classified by itself.
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almost all levels. Officials either
didn't trust their own instincts or felt
hesitant in making them to the
public, even when they had deep sus-
picions the party found.
While inspection tours of Jonestown
could not verify the complaints, U.S.
officials often doubted that they were
seeing the truth on their visits. The

doubts were generally discounted as
unverifiable.

One State officer visiting Jonestown,
for example, was struck by the feel-
ing that many of the persons with
whom he met and spoke appeared
drugged or robot-like in their reac-
tions, the report said. But, feeling his
short stay—four hours—and his lack
of training in what would amount to a
psychiatric field, he qualified the
statement by saying it was a personal
impression, possibly influenced by read-
ing about religious brainwashing.

A similar pattern occurred when
Deborah Blakey, a Gadsden, first re-
vealed the mass suicides through to U.S.
officials. The report said that, even
though her charges were not accepted
at face value and doubts about her
motives lingered, there was present in
the embassy the thought: what if she
is telling the truth?