

35 Years Later, Jim Jones Cult Leaves Lessons for Believers

It's been 35 years since 918 people, including 257 children, died on Nov. 18, 1978, at the Peoples Temple massacre in Jonestown. The mass murder inside the South American jungle commune in Guyana was engineered by Jim Jones, a murderous cult leader, and was the only time in American history a member of Congress, Leo Ryan, D-Calif., was killed in the line of official duty.

Most of the victims were forced to commit suicide by drinking a fatal cocktail of poisoned punch spiked with a Valium tranquilizer. In the days that followed the slaughter of the innocents, Jonestown became a widely reported global event whose media coverage rivaled that of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

As a result of the massacre, "drinking the Kool-Aid" entered the popular lexicon to describe blind acceptance of a belief without critical analysis. Some of the Jonestown dead were not suicides; they were killed against their will, and the actual drink of death was, in fact, something called Flavor Aid.

The charismatic Jones, an ordained Indiana minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), established the "Peoples Temple" in San Francisco in 1956. His primary recruitment targets were the poor, mostly people of color, and idealists who sought an egalitarian community of economic justice and spiritual fulfillment.

Jones promised a utopian society that provided for the common welfare of its members. But like most cult leaders, he became a tyrannical leader, and he exercised that power in a dangerous megalomaniacal way.

In 1973, an increasingly paranoid Jones moved Temple members to Guyana and named the Peoples Temple compound in honor of himself. Once free of U.S. law, Jones became a brutal dictator in his isolated and heavily guarded compound, where he controlled his devotees' lives.

Jones employed mind control techniques, including blaring his constant sermons and speeches on loudspeakers day and night, interrupting normal sleep patterns. He physically separated married couples, controlled the community's diet and banned communication with the outside world. He required long hours of hard labor in the tropical heat and humidity, and no Peoples Temple members were permitted to leave the jungle compound.

Concerned ex-members in California brought details of Jones' terror to the attention of Ryan, who, along with some aides and a TV crew, visited the Guyana "paradise." Although Jones presented a false show of normalcy for the congressman, Ryan learned that some abused members wanted to escape. The California congressman offered transportation for those who desired to leave.

A vindictive Jones ordered the murder of Ryan, his staff and the TV reporters, as well as escapees. When the congressman and his group prepared to board the small planes on the jungle tarmac, an execution squad shot and killed five people, including Ryan. Many others were wounded.

Back in the compound, Jones feared a U.S. military rescue mission as a result of killing a congressman, and the cult leader demanded that his trapped followers commit suicide as a "revolutionary act." Babies and children were killed first by pouring the poisoned juice into their mouths. Next came the doomed adults; Jones himself was killed by a gunshot, perhaps self-inflicted.

The world reeled in shock and disgust at the Jonestown deaths,

but it was not the last of cult mass murders. In the 1990s, numerous deaths and suicides occurred among David Koresh's Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; Marshall Applewhite's Heavens Gate cult in San Diego; and the Order of the Solar Temple in Canada and Switzerland. And these are only the best-known cult massacres.

Even as the Peoples Temple fades into history, Jonestown is a bitter reminder of what happens when people surrender their emotional and moral independence and become spiritual slaves to evil leaders who guarantee salvation, eternal life, utopia either here on earth or in outer space.

Jones evolved into a monster when he discovered he could manipulate and dominate people with false promises. Jones was a mass murderer, but he did not have to invent lethal poison, harsh re-education camps or isolated gulags. Years earlier, Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse Tung and Joseph Stalin wrote the book that Jim Jones malevolently followed.

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