Jungle Geopolitics in Guyana:

How a Communist Utopia That Ended in Massacre Came to be Sited

By RAYMOND E. CRIST *

ABSTRACT. When nearly 1,000 American men, women and children lost their lives in a *mass murder and suicide* rite in 1978 staged by a madman, *Jim Jones*, a former Christian minister turned Communist leader, many Americans asked, "Why?" The press, overcoming earlier lethargy, amassed facts permitting a sophisticated *psychological* and *sociological* explanation. Neglected, however, was the question why was the *Jonestown Communist utopia* sited in the Guyana jungle? Given the human and geographical circumstances, its siting in the *Guyana rainforest* was highly probable, affording evidence that, to some extent, at least, *people* and their *geography* determine human events.

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the tropical rainforest, popularly referred to as jungle. Myths, facts, and fancies are inextricably mixed in its literature. W. H. Hudson pictured the jungle in the richly-wrought, wistful poetry of *Green Mansions* (1), whereas José Eustacio Rivera described it in *The Vortex* (*La Voragine*) (2) as a sinister mantrap, a veritable Green Hell, where death was constantly making his rounds.

Yet Henry W. Bates described in vivid prose, in his *The Naturalist on the Amazon* (3), the joys of living eight years there, and shuddered at the thought of returning to the cold, foggy days of his native England. He felt as completely at home in the forest as do the members of the primitive Indian tribes of the Amazon Basin.

Most people of middle latitudes probably feel that jungles are at worst very dangerous, at best, unfriendly, and that tropical diseases and the constant heat quickly undermine the vitality of the physical body and speedily unravel one's moral fiber as well. To be sure, germs can sometimes be dangerous and insects are always annoying, but the natural forest environment, if proper health precautions are taken, can be a very safe and pleasant place for man to live in. As is so often the case, the animal most dangerous to man may turn out to be man himself. The Jonestown tragedy of 1978 is a case in point.

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Although Venezuela has long claimed all of the territory west of the Essequibo River, in all the reports of the Jonestown disaster almost no mention was made of the significance of the *site* in the geopolitics of the area. This significance is brought into focus by consideration of the facts about the area and the occurrence elicited by their investigation from the viewpoints of human geography and social psychology.

I

THE GEOPOLITICS

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND of the Venezulean position *vis-a-vis* the west bank of the Essequibo River is detailed in a paper published in Caracas in 1976, *El Reclamo a la Guayana Esequiba*. In resumé, this paper states that in 1810, when Venezuela proclaimed its independence from Spain, it automatically assumed control of the territories of the Captaincy General of the Spanish colonial government, the eastern boundary of which was the Essequibo River. This was pointed out to the British Government in 1821, and again in 1824 and 1825, and the claim was never contested. British subjects, however, continued to penetrate the area on the west bank of the Essequibo.

In 1840 there appeared in *Parliamentary Papers* the map of the German naturalist-explorer Schomburgk, who was working for the English, in which some 142,000 square kilometers of the west bank of the Essequibo were incorporated into British Guayana. A gold strike in that area in 1850 attracted many more people. In 1887, Great Britain published a more ambitious map, as it were, incorporating 168,000 square kilometers west of the Essequibo and declaring in error the former (1840) Schomburgk line (4).

Venezuela broke off diplomatic relations with Great Britain and a major territorial dispute developed. Finally, in 1892, the U.S. insisted on arbitration, and an arbitration tribunal was appointed, consisting of two U.S. citizens, one Russian and two Britons. Venezuela was represented only indirectly, by the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1899 the tribunal made its award. Britain, maintaining that a fifty-year occupation should carry title, got most of the territory in controversy. But Venezuela was able to maintain control of the mouth of the Orinoco River. Venezuela has continued to present its claim to the United Nations for the past 19 years, and negotiators have continued to work on the case, as attested by the signing of various protocols.

A balanced account of the dispute, written in fascinating style by Professor Leslie B. Rout Jr., brings the matter up-to-date (5). Hostile noises and rhetoric regularly emanate from Caracas and Georgetown. Border incidents, infiltration, and even guerrilla activity have been the order of the day. In 1968, by Presidential Decree No. 1,152, all waters between the 3-mile limit and the 12-mile limit off the Guyana coast west of the mouth of the Essequibo River were declared by Venezuela to be Venezuelan. Thus, any companies that might have been interested in the Essequibo district's mineral wealth or petroleum deposits would be scared off.

In 1969, members of two wealthy Anglo-Saxon rancher families—Ben Hart, founder of one of the clans, had continued to maintain his U.S. citizenship—were ring leaders in stirring up feeling among Amerindians in the Rupununi area of southwestern Guyana against the Georgetown Government that resulted in armed rebellion. The reaction from Georgetown was swift and deadly. Caracas officialdom denied complicity in the affair although rebels were allowed asylum in Venezuela. As a result, the campaign of recrimination on both sides heated up.

To sum up, Guyana would seem to be willing to go from protocol to protocol indefinitely, it being realized that any Georgetown Government that would sign a treaty giving up about half of Guyana's territory would probably not last long enough to ratify it. Professor Rout concludes that the logical and realistic solution would be for Guyana and Venezuela to develop the Essequibo district jointly, with acknowledged or tacit recognition of Guayanese title to the region; thus, Guyana would keep the lands and both nations would share in the profit—a consummation devoutly to be wished.

II

THE GEOGRAPHIC MILIEU

AT THE SAME TIME, Venezuela has been busy constructing an access road to points along the contested boundary line, only a few miles from the site of Jonestown. One of these roads has reached the town of Bochinche, a word in Spanish which means "riot" or "tumult"—an ideal name for a village on a disputed frontier. Another highway farther south reaches Puerto Turumban. Still another largely parallels the boundary line agreed upon in the 1899 award; it has been built to Santa Elena de Vairen. A network of runways is being built for use

by private planes and DC 3s used by government officials. The area is being opened up for tourists, both Venezuelan and foreign, anxious to visit world-renowned Angel Falls, the Piedra del Cocuy and other fascinating attractions.

A well-funded government corporation (Codesur) is charged with the development of the whole of Venezuelan Guayana. Thus, the southward and southeastward national expansion into Venezuelan Guayana grinds steadily forward. Everything is being done to incorporate the native Indian population into the national culture and economy. Schools have been built, agencies for the protection of the tribes and sales of their handicrafts have been fostered; gifts are distributed in Indian villages, whose chiefs or headmen are sponsored for trips to Caracas.

Guyana has what in farm parlance is a hard row to hoe. Most of its population and economic activity are found on the right or east bank of the Essequibo. The country's problem number one has always been to get people to settle permanently in the "economic vacuum" or the mostly empty quarter west of the Essequibo. Gold and diamond fields were worked there a century ago, attracting many adventurers and floaters, but the deposits proved to be less rich than had been expected and most of the population drifted away.

In 1959, a railway 30 miles long was opened to haul manganese ore from the mines at Matthews Ridge to Port Kaituma, on the Kaituma River, for shipment abroad, but the ore is not plentiful enough to support a permanent colony.

It is reported that after the Rupuinuini Rebellion a number of native Indians sought temporary refuge in Venezuela. However, Professor Rout quotes the *Caracas Daily Journal* of January 31, 1970 to the effect that 172 Amerindian chiefs had pledged their allegiance to the Georgetown Government. Hence, it was felt that this considerable contingent of native Americans would forthwith be a significant factor in tying to the nation the sparsely populated territory west of the Essequibo River.

However, the Guyana Government, feeling that the Amerindians were a weak reed on which to put much weight, cast about for other settlers, preferably English speakers, to establish colonies in the almost virgin forests of the Essequibo District.

The policy of planting settlers in frontier zones is not new, and certainly it is less expensive than buying bombers and bazookas and

building air-raid shelters. The ideal program is for landless nationals from other parts of the nation to be settled in uninhabited or sparsely populated frontier zones. This has been done in the Andean countries (6); but when there is a dearth of nationals willing to become pioneers, foreign nationals speaking the national language are the next best bet. In view of the territorial claims of Venezuela to the west bank of the Essequibo, the desire of Guyana to settle that area with people loyal to the Georgetown Government is certainly understandable.

III

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATION

SUCH BEING THE CASE, it was only natural that the Georgetown Government should accept the People's Temple group of Jim Jones. For the better part of five years their leader had achieved a consistently favorable image in the San Francisco area. To the Guyana authorities he came well recommended. They were unaware of his seamy side, as it were. Unfortunately, facts brought out in the investigation of the tragedy in which nearly 1,000 men, women and children were slain or forced to join their leader in mass suicide were unavailable at the time these U.S. citizens were given visas for Guyana (7).

The group had firm leadership. Most of its members had implicit faith in the decisions of their leader, Jones. They were a cohesive group, willing to work hard, and their religious zeal was great: all these qualities are very important in a pioneering community. Although many of them did not have experience in farming in the tropics, they had sufficient financial backing to live while learning how.

It was impossible to foresee that the governments of both the United States and Guyana might be embarrassed by having a settlement of largely Black U.S. citizens in a remote sector of Guyana even if that part was claimed by a powerful neighbor. Under normal circumstances there would have been no untoward developments, but, as events proved, these circumstances were not normal.

The normal reaction of a group whose leadership is under investigation would much more likely be to form a united front against the outside than to commit mass murder and suicide. The governments of the United States and Guyana can hardly be faulted for having been unable to predict the massacre of Jonestown. But when evidence was presented that the human rights of some of Jones's followers may

have been violated, the United States Government ignored it until an heroic member of Congress determined to investigate, a decision that cost him his life at the hands of Jones's "goon squad" in Guyana. Clearly the law enforcement authorities in the United States failed the innocent victims of the massacre.

Greater embarrassment was the lot of the press. As Richard W. Jencks, a broadcast journalist, wrote, "Jim Jones seems to have found safety in playing on liberal and 'progressive' sentiments—nonviolence, concern for the poor, racial justice—that made him a sacred cow to some journalists." Equally embarrassed were some politicians and some bureaucrats of causes whom Jones also manipulated. When Marshall Kilduff, writing in the magazine *New West,* exposed Jones's utopia as a madman's (8) secret society, sustained by terror and brainwashing, political figures and the director of the Northern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union brought pressure, according to Jencks, to end the magazine's campaign (9).

The Jones cult was a communistic religion based on a mystique developed from Soviet communistic ideology. Professor Lewis closely examines the complex relationship between politics and religion in general and the Caribbean in particular as a haven for messianic cultism, along with the positive and negative aspects of the Peoples' Temple movement. He meticulously analyzes the ultimate meaning of this macabre event, and attempts to determine whether it has anything to teach those leaders who hope to effect basic social and economic change in the region. He concludes:

What, then, is the last word on Jonestown? As it is placed in perspective by its future historians there can be little doubt that they will see it as one of those terrible incidents that illuminate a whole age. It possesses a universal dimension because it speaks to every school of thought, every belief system, in the world in which we live. No one single school can teach self-righteous lessons about it, for the simple reason that it challenges every school to re-examine its central assumptions. . . .

However distorted their vision may have been, the Jonestown cultists believed in a cause larger than themselves. In an American world where too many people simply live for themselves, in lives made spiritually arid by egotism and hedonism, they proclaimed a gospel of sacrificial altruism. They believed in that gospel; and at the end they were prepared, literally, to lay down their lives for it. As we watch them, in that final apocalyptic act, moving forward slowly, willingly, indeed almost happily, to accept their potion of [a fruit-flavored soft

drink] (10) and cyanide outside the central pavilion of Jonestown, as the saints gather at the river, as they prepare to cross their Jordan, as they enter into the valley of the very shadow of death, our final sensation must be, cannot but be, the sensation of compassion and pity (11).

The social science literature is full of utopias. Usually they form, flourish, wane and then become normalized or they disintegrate. As the distinguished utopist, W. H. G. Armytage, showed, the reasons for their existence, apart from the basic cause, what the sociologists call *anomie* or alienation from the existing society, vary from one to another. In the case of Jonestown, the community existed because of Jim Jones, his personality, the personalities of his followers and the effects upon the latter of the stresses and tensions of urban society. The community was moved from Indianapolis to Ukiah, California, then to San Francisco and was finally sited in Guyana because of local circumstances; in the case of the permanent and terminal site, because of the geopolitics of the Guyana rainforest.

Given the personality of the leader and his background, and the personalities and background of the followers, the organization, the so-called "People's Temple," was inevitable. Given the geographical milieu in combination with the facts that Jones's followers were mostly Black (as are many Guyanese) and he and his followers were English-speaking (as are many Guayanese also), its siting in Guyana was highly probable. To some extent, at least, people and their geography determine human events.

1. W. H. Hudson, *Green Mansions, a Romance of the Tropical Forest* (1904), (New York: Modern Library, 1916).

2. Second ed. (Havana: Editorial de Certe y Literatura, 1974).

3. Henry W. Bates, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons, &c* (New York: J. B. Alden, 1883).

4. An objective assessment of the work of Schomburgk is to be found in Earl Parker Hanson's *South From the Spanish Main* (New York: 1967), pp. 394–414.

5. Leslie B. Rout Jr., *Which Way Out?: An Analysis of the Venezuela-Guayana Boundary Dispute,* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University, 1971).

6. R. E. Crist, "Politics and Geography: Some Aspects of Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces Operative in Andean America," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (October, 1966), pp. 349–58.

7. See the revealing report by Richard W. Jencks, "The Press and Jim Jones," *Wall Street Journal,* December 29, 1978.

8. Jones began the mass suicide drills in 1973, five years before the tragedy.

9. The paper was told, according to Jencks, "the People's Temple has made a solid contribution to social justice in our community." *Loc. cit.*

10. Not Kool-Aid, according to Russel Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times;* see *St. Petersburg Times,* Nov. 18, 1979. Chandler says Jones stashed away $12,900.000.

11. Gordon K. Lewis, *Gather With the Saints at the River—The Jonestown Holocaust of 1978: A Descriptive and Interpretive Essay on Its Ultimate Meaning From a Caribbean Viewpoint* (Rio Piedras, P.R.: University of Puerto Rico Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1979), pp. 47–48.

Celebrating a Classic's Centenary

ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS of scholars and social reformers around the world have been celebrating the centenary of the publication of Henry George's economic and philosophical classic, *Progress and Poverty,* in a variety of interesting ways. The Economic and Social Science Research Association of Great Britain, of which V. H. Blundell is secretary (Unimex House, 600 Green Lane, Goodmayes, Ilford, Essex 1G3 9SR) is publishing a series of Centenary Essays. The first, by Fred Harrison, a leading Fleet Street journalist, *Land Reform or Red Revolution,* argues that the world is headed toward the triumph of Marxian socialism or its repression by tyrannical fascism unless George's program for an ethical democratic society is adopted by moral suasion, and continuing research and education. The second, by Seymour Rauch, well known American lecturer on land economics and taxation, *Economic Answers to Ecological Problems,* shows how George's progressive land, tax and other reforms can be used to advance environmental protection.

A Significant Study of Generational Crowding

THE FERTILITY RATE in the United States dropped to a record low in the Great Depression of the 1930s, then rose steeply to a peak in 1957, the end of the post-war 'baby boom' and subsequently declined sharply. What were the causes of change? What were the consequences for a wide range of economic, social and demographic phenomena? Dr. Irving Leveson, well known for his interdisciplinary research to the readers of this *Journal,* investigated these questions for the Hudson Institute, Croton-on-Hudson, New York 10520, under a federal grant. The consequences were large: for example, generational crowding appears to have made a major contribution to bringing about greater participation by women in the labor force in the 1970s because it produced adverse labor market conditions for men. W.L.