

6 : Don't Drink the Kool-Aid

The Jonestown Tragedy, the Press, and the New American Sensibility

On Thanksgiving Day 1978, my parents hosted dinner at their home in the San Francisco Bay Area. What everyone expected to be an ordinary multigenerational family gathering turned into a wake of sorts when, several days before, the story of the mass death of Peoples Temple members first appeared in the press. My father's favorite cousin, his cousin's wife, and the son Temple leader Jim Jones had persuaded them to foster were all residents of the Temple's jungle commune, Jonestown, in Guyana. Although the details were still emerging, our relative's name had already appeared on the earliest lists of Jonestown dead. We compulsively watched TV news reports through our dinner, mourning our relations while indulging in turkey and pumpkin pie. I also harbored a secret as I sat at the table, one I did not want to bother my rattled parents with. A reporter had contacted me, finding my unusual family name in the phonebook. The encounter unnerved me a little, too, as Temple defectors warned of "avenging angels" harassing relatives. Not long after that odd Thanksgiving, one of my Berkeley housemates came home from an end-of-the-term party that, he reported with great mirth, featured a vat of alcohol and Kool-Aid, "jungle juice," he called it, a reference to the tub of cyanide and flavored drink mix that killed the more than 900 members of the Jonestown commune.

While most Americans did not know anyone affiliated with the Peoples Temple, my encounters with the deaths in Jonestown were otherwise typical. The nation received the news with sadness, confusion, paranoia, anger, disbelief, and, sometimes, black humor. Not surprising, a story that big provoked "a compulsive searching for explanation, whether cosmic, social, political or psychological," a commentator noted. The public interpretation of Jonestown went through many phases but ultimately came to be symbolized by a warning phrase, "don't drink the Kool-Aid," meaning, "don't fall for a charlatan, a too-good-to-be-true promise, or a lie." Lost since the sixties was any "broad

faith”¹ in American institutions to protect ordinary people, their needs, and their interests. In response, a new personal ideal emerged as the seventies ended, one that was independent, resilient, and resourceful—a survivor. In the case of Jonestown, Americans practiced their skepticism and self-preservation skills against many different kinds of establishments, some old and some new. Helping them to make sense of the senseless was a press likewise determined to stay relevant and be anti-Establishment.

For years, “nobody was paying attention” to Jones or his jungle compound in Guyana. After more American civilians died in a single day than had ever died before—only the 9/11 attacks would surpass it in scope—“the amount of attention [the press] devoted transformed it into a major event.”² Tragedy got peoples’ attention. Gallup polls taken after the event indicated that 98 percent of Americans were familiar with Jonestown and the Peoples Temple. People ranked its significance with Pearl Harbor, the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and the assassination of President John Kennedy. Yet unlike those events, the Jonestown deaths did not directly affect most Americans. What made the story so compelling anyway, according to a British pundit, was its considerable similarity “to the modern imagination of disaster.” Historian William Graebner notes that Americans developed a revealing fondness for disaster movies in the late 1970s, a taste encouraged by the decade’s supposed “existential despair.” The “collapse of [traditional] meaning and values” in the sixties, he argues, left people feeling vulnerable. Negotiating modern life required less conformity and more choices, along with the ability to improvise, resist authority, and persist, despite the many evils the world contained. Graebner sees disaster movies as a metaphor for 1970s life, a set of challenges Americans met by “defining themselves . . . as survivors.” Stories of “catastrophe” vicariously tested people, providing “a curiously pleasurable space—a space of emotion, of decision, of action, of caring, of sacrificing, of agency.” As interpreted by the press, the story of Jonestown, like disaster films, countered “feel[ings of having] . . . no leverage.”³ Just as the survivors of movies like *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) or *Earthquake* (1974) fought back against overwhelming danger, so too did accounts of what happened at Jonestown acknowledge that in the modern world, individuals might have to take more responsibility for their own welfare.

The press delivered to the public a Jonestown story replete with the hallmarks of a disaster film. There was a seemingly indifferent Estab-

ishment, maverick heroes, hints of conspiracy, sex and violence, and the perceived presence of evil. Since the deaths occurred outside the country and the U.S. government's longtime response to Jones had been very hands off, media had unusual power to shape the Jonestown narrative. In their version, disaster occurred because individuals, like their government, disavowed responsibility for their own well-being, ceding power to a madman. Although the vast majority of Jonestown residents died, some survived, and they did so by resisting Jones, even at the last moment. The narrative created by the press and embellished by experts encouraged people to identify with the heroes of Jonestown rather than its victims, teaching them to recognize and embrace the differences between themselves and those who drank the Kool-Aid. It was a message many would carry into the 1980s and beyond.

Until its very end, the Peoples Temple flew below the national radar, even in an era when oddities tended to attract a lot of media attention. Its seeming lack of newsworthiness, though, was to a degree contrived. Like my family, West Coasters might have known someone who belonged to the Peoples Temple, listening politely to their recruitment efforts and then moving on. Politically liberal San Franciscans might find Temple members robotic and Jones a little too fond of adulation, but "the Reverend Jones could also turn out a crowd for election day," so they did not look a gift horse in the mouth. Compared to other religious or pseudo-religious groups, the group appeared benign since its roots were Christian and its membership diverse. Its press was sparse but generally favorable. Local papers depicted it as "an alternative religious sect involved with timely and important social issues," not a cult. Once the press did start to question, even a little bit, Jones moved the group to the commune it was already building in the Guyanese jungle. Once there, he controlled the story, preferring no news at all to trying to generate propaganda for the consumption of outsiders. As the archivist of the group noted, nobody really seemed to care "how they [Temple members] lived; but we all remember how they died."⁴

Consequently, when Bay Area congressman Leo Ryan decided to visit the Temple, it was not a media event. Ryan could not induce colleagues to make his investigation an official congressional enterprise. Instead, he put his faith in the press to "act as a lever to force open the doors of the Jonestown jungle settlement," even though he could entice mostly local press to journey with him. Only NBC's *Today Show* and the *Washington Post* sent crews, and the *Post* reporter was not happy about



Congressman Leo Ryan interviewed Jim Jones in Jonestown just hours before Ryan died. Left to right: Ryan, his aide Jackie Speier, Jones, his attorney Charles Garry, and the U.S. attaché to the American embassy in Guyana, Richard Dwyer. Dwyer and Speier survived the airfield attack. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Examiner Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

having to cover “a zany story about a congressman wanting to investigate a freaky religious commune” instead of having Thanksgiving with his family.⁵ Virtually everyone else accompanying Ryan had a family member in Jonestown, representatives of a group known as the Concerned Relatives, which had had no success inducing the federal government to intervene in Peoples Temple affairs. The party had a mostly positive visit and were impressed by the colony, but not by Jones. It was only at the end when some residents asked to leave that the encounter grew tense. An assailant pulled a knife on Ryan, bloodying him a bit, but the party regrouped and got ready to depart. As they reached the local airfield, the reporters were mentally planning their stories, and Ryan likely thought the worst was over. Out of nowhere came Temple gunmen, who killed five members of the group, including Ryan, and wounded more. The story that would consume the country, though, was about to start a few miles away, as Jones called his people around him and had his lieutenants bring forth vats of cyanide and flavored drink mix in order to commit suicide as a revolutionary act. Only then did the

story become national in scope. Only then did the press, politicians, and most people pay attention.

The press explained its previous disinterest in the Peoples Temple as accidental, a “‘missed’ news story.” That claim was disingenuous at best. Jim Jones wooed editors, riding an anti-Establishment tidal wave by providing cash awards to newspapers for preserving free speech. Simultaneously, and less visibly, he also intimidated those questioning the group’s carefully crafted veneer. *San Francisco Examiner* religion reporter Lester Kinsolver published only half of his 1972 series on the group before Temple members picketed the paper’s offices and his editor ended it. *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Marshall Kilduff was “put on notice very quietly that Jones was a friend of my superior’s,” a point reinforced when he spotted him at a Peoples Temple service. Despite securing interviews with a number of Temple defectors who told of “the Spartan regimentation, fear and self-imposed humiliation,” along with the discipline, physical punishments, and psychological pressures Jones exerted on church members, Kilduff had to publish in a smaller venue, *New West* magazine. *New West*, in turn, had its offices burglarized by Temple members. “The story of Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple is not over,” Kilduff and his *New West* coauthor, Phil Tracy, predicted. Indeed, the details were damning enough to send Jones and his followers prematurely to Jonestown. But neither *New West* nor any other news outlet followed up. While the *Post*’s Charles Krause believed that “it was the press . . . which finally began to pierce the veil and reveal the truth about the Peoples Temple,” those endeavors only happened after the fact because journalists often “shar[ed] the same perceptions” as the liberal Jones or were afraid to challenge him.⁶

The press’s failures to investigate the Peoples Temple stand out particularly because of its commitment to exposure, which earned it respect in 1970s America. Few mainstream institutions survived the sixties as successfully as did the press. Its reputation, moreover, rested on its willingness to take on sacred cows and authority figures. The contemporary press featured “reporters for the public—not for the politicians,” according to famed journalist Theodore H. White. Investigative journalism, which was supposed to reveal hypocrisy and lies, was in vogue. Launched in 1968, *Sixty Minutes* documented scandals, often with reporters confronting the guilty on camera. The *New York Times* published the famous leaked documents revealing governmental deceit over the war in Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers. Reporter Seymour

Hersh's investigations into the My Lai massacre prompted public outrage and forced the military to react. The Watergate scandal marked the apex of the "heroic-journalist" and the nadir of public trust in government. By 1976, only 11 percent of Americans had faith in their government (down from 44 percent a decade before), but the two *Washington Post* journalists who stayed doggedly on the Watergate story, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, ranked at the top of youth's list of heroes.⁷ The public had high expectations for the press about to cover the end of the Peoples Temple community. But the distance, the terrain, the fierce Guyanese government, editorial hesitation, and previous public disinterest had already worked against exposés of the Peoples Temple.

Other journalistic trends pushed the story toward the disaster genre. Although investigative journalism was the professional ideal, audience, costs, and competition often undermined its rigor. Like so many other parts of 1970s culture, the news media was fragmented, reflecting a shift from a single mainstream media to one with more outlets and more voices. Sometimes it just was not clear what constituted the Establishment's media and who its challengers were. So much competition sometimes put greater value on getting the story first rather than the accuracy and completeness of the reportage. Ambitious young reporters like Geraldo Rivera parlayed local stories into independent careers. Visuals competed with analysis, a means of allowing members of a fractious public at least the illusion of deciding for themselves what events actually meant. Local TV news producers, as Mary Richards and her fictional WJM news team discovered, wanted human interest stories. Supermarket tabloids paid for firsthand accounts, undermining professional ethics. Personality mattered on the air. Print reporters created personal style through New Journalism, a journalistic method pioneered in the 1960s by writers like Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote. New Journalism featured "colorful style, extensive description, experimental use of language and punctuation, changing points of view, [and] personal commentary from the writer." Like the era that nurtured it or the "faction" and docudramas spawned by *Roots*, New Journalism was also subjective. As television stopped self censoring, newscasts began to include graphic coverage of sex and violence. "The commercial value of blood and gore," a contemporary scholar studying media responses to Jonestown noted, heightened interest in the tale. Indeed, a Temple representative in San Francisco recalled that what the press wanted from her was "the most gruesome details."⁸

The journalists accompanying Ryan saw themselves as mavericks and individuals rather than as Establishment voices, even though they represented “institutions of great ‘power.’” Reporters expected to fight their editors, pressed to see parts of Jonestown their hosts preferred not to show them, and tried to trip up Jim Jones when they interviewed him. On the way to the Port Kaituma airstrip, where he would be wounded by Temple gunmen, Charles Krause already anticipated a conflict between the “scoop” he assumed his editor wanted and the “long and thoughtful piece” he wanted to write. Yet his work was also opinionated and at times cynical. Until the end, he “rather admired Jim Jones’s goals” and did not believe the Temple was a “crazy fringe cult.” His eyewitness status afforded him popular credibility, which the *Washington Post* parlayed into greater exposure. The *Post* arranged his reports into a “quickie” book released two weeks after Ryan’s death, the rights for which Krause sold to CBS in a development deal.⁹ Many Jonestown journalists approached their topic as Krause did, believing their professional responsibilities were anti-Establishment.

Congressman Leo Ryan was a politician made for the changing world of journalism. He too was a crusader. He spent a week as an ordinary inmate at Folsom Prison studying conditions there and boasted that he was the only American congressman ever to chain himself to a baby seal to prevent its slaughter. When several reputable constituents told him that they suspected their relatives were being held in Jonestown against their wills and the son of an old friend, and Temple defector, turned up dead, he decided to investigate. Since no other member of Congress joined the venture, Ryan decided to go it alone, bringing the press and family members to try to expose what the American government seemed disinclined to examine. State Department representatives and diplomats on the ground in Georgetown were polite, skeptical of Ryan’s entourage, and not especially helpful. Most of what he learned about Jonestown came from alternative sources, particularly the Concerned Relatives organization. Ryan seemed undaunted by the makeshift status of his investigation, trusting that so long as he had the press along to document the truth, nothing bad could happen to him.

The drawbacks of Ryan’s strategy became clear only after the fact. On the Port Kaituma airstrip, Temple assailants targeted those with visible tools of the journalistic trade, cameramen. As eager to use Ryan as he was to use them, the reporters accompanying him disregarded State Department warnings that they might “anger the cultists.” They felt

confident they could handle “the public relations-conscious Temple.” When there was only limited seating on Ryan’s plane into the jungle, they successfully lobbied for seats over communards’ family members, arguing that publicity was a useful thing. They assumed that, unlike previous journalists, they would be able to see past Jones’s “obvious, naïve, and unsophisticated” methods. Members of Ryan’s press entourage were cocky and, as it turned out, themselves naïve. Charles Krause thought nothing of the Temple leaders who watched their arrival at the airport in Georgetown and the press visas that had to be renewed every twenty-four hours and assumed it was an “irritating” coincidence when the hotel where members of the press had reservations had no room for them. Eventually, he realized that Jones “could stop us by having us killed. The thought that he might try never crossed my mind.” A *Los Angeles Times* reporter finally concluded that bringing the press to Guyana “probably led to his own death [Ryan’s] and the deaths of three news media persons with him.”¹⁰

That possibility did not put a damper on press coverage. Perhaps given the danger, the remoteness, or the proximity to the Thanksgiving holiday, many of those assigned to cover the unfolding news were of Krause’s generation, including NBC’s Andrea Mitchell and Meredith Vieira. They were young, ambitious, and intrusive. In Guyana, they swarmed all over witnesses, including people who had just seen family members die. In San Francisco, they thrust microphones in front of visibly upset relatives of Jonestown casualties and pushed on barricades, in some cases following people home. Local reporters called bewildered people like me, hungry for any added drama they could put in a story. Krause’s book was one of three to appear within six weeks of the mass death, “like vultures picking over the remains,” a *New York Times* reviewer opined. *Roots*’ success at dramatizing unpleasant history practically guaranteed a Jonestown docudrama. Within days of the tragedy, pitches were “pouring into ABC,” and a cartoon in the *Chicago Tribune* suggested that the story was so “disgusting, repulsive, and nauseating . . . [that it] ought to make millions.” A Mexican-made movie starring American actors appeared less than a year later, “superficial” and inaccurate, at least according to the CBS television team making *The Mad Messiah*, later renamed *The Guyana Tragedy*, based on Krause’s book. Although the books did poorly, the American TV film earned high ratings and an Emmy for its lead. Several months after the deaths, it was possible to buy a tape of the commune’s last hours, with wailing



San Francisco Examiner reporter *Tim Reiterman* used slain cameraman *Greg Robinson's* camera to document the dead bodies on the airstrip at Port Kaituma, Guyana, before being flown out of the jungle the day after Congressman *Leo Ryan*, *Robinson*, and three others died there, killed by Peoples Temple gunmen. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Examiner Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

babies and Jones demanding, “For God’s sake, let’s get on with it,” as some seemed reluctant to drink the potion.¹¹ Americans sometimes decried the media’s excesses but craved the vicarious experience of disaster, counting on the press to put them straight into, as more than one journalist quoted Joseph Conrad, the “heart of darkness.”

Rather than being perceived as the catalysts for disaster, journalists became the first heroes of Jonestown. Three died with Ryan, several others were wounded, and all were stranded overnight in the jungle, awaiting transportation out of the crime scene while hoping that Jones’s henchmen did not return. “Lying in a hospital bed with one arm immobilized and the other carrying an intravenous tube, reporter *Tim Reiterman* early today dictated this story,” read the editorial note before one *San Francisco Examiner* report. *NBC Nightly News* filmed Los Angeles-affiliate cameraman *Steven Sung* in similar condition: heavily bandaged arm, IV bag, and a phalanx of microphones. Colleagues lauded *Examiner* photographer *Greg Robinson* and *Bob Brown*, a Los Angeles NBC-affiliate cameraman, both killed by Temple gunmen, for their courage and professionalism. “Sure he was worried,” speculated one of *Robinson’s* colleagues, “he was worried about the humidity in his camera. He

was worried about getting the pictures out and about having his camera taken away from him.” Brown served as the model for actor Michael Douglas’s character in the 1978 film *The China Syndrome*. Douglas had shadowed him for the role and memorialized him thereafter as the man who “kept his finger on the button of his camera even while he was dying.” Television viewers could read the jeans or safari jackets worn by the journalists accompanying Ryan just as easily as could one of the Concerned Relatives, a college student who thought the journalists “kind of ‘hard core’” and Brown, in particular, “real macho.” Ryan’s press phalanx looked, talked, and acted like countercultural, anti-Establishment activists.¹²

As reporters, however, they were at the mercy of the situational realities of Guyana, excluded from the Jonestown commune by Guyanese authorities they did not respect or trust. On 20 November 1978, NBC news anchor David Brinkley reported that more than 300 “cultists,” as he called them, were dead. For the next few days, journalists tried to piece together the “grisly mathematical puzzle” of Jonestown by reconciling the number of the dead that Guyanese soldiers had removed with the number of followers Jones boasted he had, which left 800 people missing. Nobody in authority offered a convincing explanation for the missing, leading the normally sober *Los Angeles Times* to improvise that they “ran, screaming, into the jungle” before they could be “mowed down” by “grinning executioners, loyal to ‘Bishop’ Jones until the end.” By Thanksgiving Day, 23 November, military forces, American and Guyanese, counted beds at the commune and lowered the number of missing to several hundred. A day later, U.S. military personnel removed the first layer of bodies closest to Jones and found more lying beneath them, just over 900 in all. “Day by day,” the *Chicago Tribune* noted, a “new stunning horror” unfolded. The unlikeliness of what authorities told them made reporters suspicious that crucial pieces of the story had been withheld or misrepresented.¹³

In Guyana and back home, competition was fierce for a story that was unprecedented, bizarre, and utterly opaque. As CBS newsman Roger Mudd noted, Jones’s group was “little known outside of northern California.” Those most willing to be interviewed in the early days had strong opinions about the Temple, either pro or con, which skewed coverage and spurred reporters to press harder for details. Temple defectors predicted revenge by Jones loyalists, adding emotionalism to an already emotional story. Guyanese natives told ABC and CBS crews that

Jones had a body double, leading to rumors that the double had died in his place. Three members of the Temple inner circle materialized outside the compound carrying guns and a suitcase full of money. Had they really been dispatched by Jones's mistress to bring the money to the Soviet embassy (their story), or were they, as most Temple defectors told reporters, part of a hit squad to kill Jones's enemies? Early reportage emphasized uncertainty, anxiety, and panic, the same sense of "what next?" that Americans felt after 9/11, the same adrenalin-pumping qualities that prevailed in disaster movies like *Jaws* or *The Exorcist*.¹⁴

As more journalists arrived in Guyana to cover the story—"literally hundreds," according to *Rolling Stone's* Tim Cahill—a sense of barely controlled chaos prevailed. For several days, reporters had to bide their time, limited by changing Guyanese and U.S. military policies, "endlessly [describing] the logistics of body removal." When the governments finally granted "about fifty news ghouls" access to Jonestown, they fought for seats on helicopters and planes, "like a Tokyo subway at rush hour." Finally in Jonestown, "everything was ironic," Cahill thought. He saw "bits and pieces" that had fallen off human bodies plowed under by Guyanese workers using tractors once used to work commune crops. At Jones's cottage, there were "books and magazines . . . about conspiracies . . . hundreds of Valium tablets . . . a pile of blank Guyanese power-of-attorney forms," and a series of confessions addressed "to Dad." "No one," Cahill noted, "admitted to being happy and well adjusted." He saw a guard tower painted with "bright seascapes" and outfitted with a slide, a "denial of the tower's function" he likened to the Newspeak in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. Looking up, he spied a double rainbow "encompassing the whole of Jonestown." Cahill seemed particularly taken by the juxtaposition of evidence of gruesome death with ordinary life, a commentary that to him represented the senselessness of it all. Seeing Jonestown, even with the bodies removed, confirmed that evil had been perpetrated there.¹⁵

Photographs captured what the reporters saw. Out of necessity, early stories had to be visual, since most journalists were denied access to the commune. Enterprising news teams chartered planes and flew over the compound to secure images from the air. The "crazy quilt" of bodies below defied interpretation but interrupted many a viewer's dinner, much as Vietnam's television war had interrupted meals half a dozen years before. Later, with access to the compound, photographers snapped pictures of "the instruments of death," paper cups and hypo-



Photographs like this one both startled and fascinated an American public grown used to visual representations of death yet not prepared for the shocking deaths of so many “ordinary” people. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Examiner Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

dermic needles and the “vat of cyanide-laced ade.” But the most gruesome images preceded the removal of the bodies. Guyanese authorities gave the first journalists on the scene early access to the compound. They sent home to American news outlets photos of “the incredible carpet of bodies” and Jim Jones’s corpse, “so swollen” his torso had “burst through his red shirt,” his “once-handsome features . . . barely recognizable.”¹⁶ *Time*, *Newsweek*, and most daily papers included panoramas of dead bodies in their Jonestown coverage, requiring editors to make on-the-spot decisions about what was and was not appropriate for public consumption. The photos put Americans face-to-face with ordinary people who died horrible and unnecessary deaths.

Like history textbooks, American journalism became more visual in the 1970s. Satellite feeds made distant images instantly accessible, and newsmagazines added color to their photographs. While baby boomers were raised on puffy photojournalistic pieces about astronauts’ families or Kennedy offspring, the war in Vietnam normalized the idea of the photo exposé, whether it was the teenager hovering over a dead body at Kent State or a naked Vietnamese girl running from napalm. Jones-

town pictures were both ubiquitous and unsettling. They “wouldn’t go away,” the parent of victims recalled. No longer protected by a family-friendly culture, children saw them too. The “stacks of bodies,” columnist Colman McCarthy noted, became schoolyard conversation, a disturbing new-age “initiation rite . . . into adulthood.” “Can a society take bloated bodies and trailer-loads of shiny corpse containers with its evening meals and be unchanged?” a *Washington Post* editorial wondered.¹⁷ A few readers or viewers complained; most, however, just looked.

Once the body counts were accurate and the bodies were removed, the press, experts, and the public turned their attention to making sense of Jones and his movement. Was he “the product of a peculiar lunacy, or does it reflect on us all?” Commentators usually suggested that it was some of both, that Jones was a fraud who effectively cultivated followers through manipulation. Journalists retroactively put the Peoples Temple into a category they had resisted before—the cult. “In this bewildering era,” as *People* magazine put it, the average American already knew a lot about cults, including the “Moonies [Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church], Children of God, Hare Krishnas, Synanon [a California-based group for recovering addicts] and Scientology.” Citizens encountered their members in airports and on street corners, read about them in *Time* and *Newsweek*, and, if they lived in the college towns where so many of the groups recruited, likely warded off their solicitations or invitations on a regular basis. *Newsweek* reported that there were 3,000 different cults, and *Time* noted that they “come roughly in 50-year cycles,” especially during “times of great social change.” “People under the age of 30” were said to be particularly vulnerable, as they were “searching for meaning” in uncertain post-1960s times. Cults offered “the attractions of living within a single closed system of life and beliefs,” columnist Ellen Goodman explained, providing “relief” and “retreat” from a complex world, one where individuals longed for “a sense of meaning and place.”¹⁸ Cults served, most news outlets suggested, those rendered desperate or confused by sixties changes.

Cults flourished because of the times; but many Americans also blamed the federal government for enabling them. Some felt President Jimmy Carter facilitated their spread by “just managing” rather than “leading the nation.” For others, however, the government’s disinclination to regulate or monitor cults revealed what mocking leftists already called “political correctness” when describing their colleagues’ overzealous and inflexible application of sixties values. By the second half

of the decade, one political establishment seemed to have replaced another. In this new one, dogmatism shaped by equal justice prevailed to an extreme and illogical degree. Political correctness, in this instance the government's too-careful recognition of "rights of individuals" and respect for diversity, meant that federal authorities trod carefully around cults, creating a kind of authority vacuum that gave unscrupulous leaders great scope. Many a family member with a relative in the Hare Krishnas or the Church of Scientology turned first to the federal government, only to discover a legal wall of protections for cults. Between 1975 and 1978, the Justice Department received from 400 to 500 complaints about them and prosecuted only one case, and lost it. A new profession, that of deprogrammer, emerged in the 1970s, an individual who could be paid to kidnap an adult from a cult and, using many of the same techniques cults were said to use, undo any brainwashing. An American Civil Liberties Union spokesperson described deprogrammers as "hired thugs," but parents felt they had few other alternatives since the government failed to advocate for their children. After the fact, the State Department's investigation into the Jonestown matter concluded that "officials were hampered by constitutional and legal restraints, which guarantee freedom of religion and assembly."¹⁹

Jonestown invigorated and focused the ongoing public debate about cults' powers, with most public voices scapegoating the American government for its failure to regulate or scrutinize cults that exposed the vulnerable to exploitation. "When is our society going to come to its senses," one woman wondered in an outraged letter to the editor, "and make a distinction between sober, legitimate religious belief and sanctified insanity?" Blaming the Establishment was almost a reflex by 1978, but it was hard for those with family or friends in cults to draw the line between tolerance and diversity on the one hand and what seemed like reckless political correctness on the other. Conservatives faulted the "liberal establishment" for giving Jim Jones "a free ride," extending First Amendment freedoms to his church that really was not a church. Of course, many conservative evangelical churches also counted on those same privileges as did Jones. Peoples Temple survivors in California continued to assert their rights as the body count rose in Guyana, insisting theirs was "an ongoing church" and, therefore, not "subject to government interference." Carter finally weighed in at a press conference, where he cautioned against using the deaths as an excuse for giving the federal government license "to control people's religious be-

liefs.” Yet for many Americans, it was government’s responsibility to protect its citizens against the dangers posed by cults. Polls taken one year later found that nearly four out of five Americans thought some religious groups were dangerous and more than three-fourths believed the government should investigate any cult with complaints against it.²⁰ The Jonestown tragedy reinforced what a lot of Americans already believed, that the American government lacked the wherewithal to protect its citizens against the many dangers of life.

In many public forums, lawyers became symbols of political correctness, the for-hire enforcers of individual freedom who kept the feckless federal government at bay. A lot of Americans bemoaned the growing litigiousness of the nation, which they assumed grew out of some version of political correctness, including civil rights complaints, environmental impact statements, affirmative action, and consumer protection laws. “The public is not pleased with lawyers,” conceded American Bar Association president William B. Spann Jr. Surveys found that a majority of citizens believed the legal system favored the rich and powerful, and a substantial minority thought an attorney would act unethically if it helped his or her client. By the late 1970s, Americans were chuckling over a cycle of lawyer jokes that lampooned a once-sterling profession as “morally deficient.” “Send lawyers, guns and money,” urged rocker Warren Zevon in a contemporary song, because “the shit has hit the fan.”²¹

Jim Jones employed two of the “radical brand of inkeater[s] [lawyers]” skilled at manipulating political correctness to defend sixties radicals. These “seamy characters” effectively fought the government but also made it impossible for family members to rescue or even contact Temple members. Both became villains in the Peoples Temple story. “To an ordinary person,” one commentator noted, they “might seem . . . guilty of a terrible crime for which they are not being prosecuted.” The first, Charles Garry, *People* magazine explained, “had been a rebel with one cause or another” all his life, defending Black Panther leaders with “flair.” Garry knew how to manipulate the system. He filed an individual Freedom of Information Act claim for every person in the Peoples Temple, seeking evidence of government harassment, the sheer volume of which hamstrung personnel at the American embassy in Guyana and kept individual employees’ gut opinions about Jonestown out of any official logs or transmissions. Garry “practically forced” Jones to grant the Ryan party entrance to his community and helped to

show the Ryan party around but did not stick around when the poison appeared. Rather, he and Jones's other attorney, with whom he was not speaking, forged a temporary truce to get out alive. His confession that he was partly "responsible" for what occurred led to no consequences, just a bill sent to the few remaining Temple members. To a frustrated public, he symbolized the abuse of legal power by cunning leftwing attorneys.²²

Jones's other lawyer, Mark Lane, also accepted no responsibility for Jones or Jonestown but seemed even "more deserving" of blame. While Garry perfected an assertive legal strategy to keep the U.S. government from probing into Temple affairs, Lane's forte was conspiratorial plots. He believed the CIA was responsible for both John F. Kennedy's and Martin Luther King's deaths. Lane fed Jones's paranoia, helping to convince the Jonestown communards that the CIA surrounded their compound. Garry feared the more flamboyant Lane was squeezing him out of a job, although he benefited when Lane's quick wit and smooth talk got the two past a Temple guard and into the jungle as the deaths began. Once outside, Lane warned of more horrible acts to come, that is, political assassinations and "death squads" poised to attack public figures, but accepted no responsibility for failing to alert authorities about the danger he believed Jones posed. Soon he capitalized on Jonestown notoriety with paid public talks and a book, *The Strongest Poison*. Lane epitomized a legal profession influenced by the theatricality of legal proceedings against radicals. This "vulture named Mark Lane," a *Chicago Tribune* headline read, "circles over Guyana's dead."²³

That the self-promoting and exploitative Lane did nothing about Jones surprised few; the State Department's hands-off stance, by contrast, infuriated journalists and citizens alike. Congressman Ryan's staff assessed their boss as a victim of the agency's "indifference and hostility." State Department personnel assured Ryan that Jonestown "was benign and reasonable despite (contrary) information." An editorial in the Temple's hometown Ukiah, California, paper declared that State Department personnel "sat on their broad butts just as though the Peoples Temple commune was not a bomb just ticking away." The idea that the State Department might look the other way rather than wrestle with diplomatic complexities or a litigious Mark Lane infuriated a public exasperated by its public servants. A State Department spokesperson argued otherwise, but the coda to his comments confirmed the sort of careful legal tolerance Garry and Lane exploited, the political correct-

ness that made so many Americans angry. His people and the embassy staff in Georgetown, he explained, had “discharged their responsibilities fully and conscientiously *within the limits placed upon them by law and basic constitutional guarantees of the right to privacy.*” Indeed, when quizzed at a press conference, President Carter refused to engage in any after-the-fact hand-wringing about deaths that “did not take place in our own country” within a group that had broken no federal laws. The federal government’s handling of the Ryan visit to Jonestown, like its oh-so-carefully calibrated policies toward the Peoples Temple more generally, fit 1970s Americans’ belief in a growing social lawlessness borne of the government’s weakness and indifference for the general welfare.²⁴

Journalists retrospectively noted Jones’s skills at exploiting political correctness, beginning in his home state of Indiana, and next in the small town of Ukiah, where he resettled his followers, and then in San Francisco. He expected—and got—favors in return for political work. He served as the head of San Francisco’s Housing Commission, and the Temple’s legal adviser before Garry or Lane, Tim Stoen, secured a job in the San Francisco District Attorney’s Office. Jones’s choice of Guyana as a place to build a new community was deliberate, stories indicated; Guyana’s government was Marxist, black, and intimidating to American politicians. U.S. law did not apply and there was no extradition treaty between the two nations, and by throwing around some “precious U.S. currency,” Jones bought privacy and protection. A “strange deal [existed] between Guyana and Peoples Temple,” the *San Francisco Chronicle* concluded, cemented by money and racial politics, including a batch of young white women sent “to seduce officials.” All this friendliness, articles noted, resulted in customs inspectors willing to look the other way as crates of guns and drugs passed through their offices on their way to Jonestown. Ryan’s press entourage quickly realized the sinister dimensions of what U.S. diplomats warned them about, that Jones “seemed to have a lot of clout with the Guyanese government.”²⁵

Wily attorneys and a seemingly ineffectual federal government merited journalists’ attention, but what the public really wanted to read were stories about the Temple’s underside and the details that demonstrated that Jones was “totally and completely mad.” A note left behind in Jonestown urged Americans to “see what we have tried to do” and to understand that the community “was a monument to life, to the [re]newal of the human spirit . . . built by a beleaguered people.” The

public, though, was not interested in the ideals that initially shaped the community nearly as much as in Jones's "dark, private side," including "the pornography of Jonestown . . . lurid details of beatings, sexual humiliations, and public acts of perversion" that he used to maintain his power, the "kooky stuff about his sex life," and the cruel punishments inflicted on disobedient Temple members. Reporters uncovered an old arrest of the preacher for soliciting sex in a public restroom in Los Angeles. Jones's "fascination with death," dating back to his childhood days performing pet funerals, also became grist for the journalistic mill. Such details disturbed, alarmed, titillated, but finally fit into the narrative of disaster, featuring the same sort of psycho-killers, child molesters, and gay predators featured on TV dramas.²⁶

Compelling firsthand accounts of the Temple's last six months supported a narrative of sixties-dreams-crushed-by-Jones's-paranoias, as survivors offered justifications for joining the movement, details of their disillusionments, and the unlikelihood of escape. "The heroic effort of carving the settlement out of a wild jungle had been all but abandoned," one explained. The new sawmill sat unused and promised farm animals never materialized, suggesting that Jones had simply given up trying to make his utopia functional. He stopped leaving the compound, imposing a pervasive gloom over the community that bore his name. He worried obsessively that the U.S. government would make good on court orders it had issued to return John Victor Stoen to his parents. Jones insisted the boy was his child; a birth certificate suggested otherwise. One of the women who tended to Jones and Temple business, Deborah Layton, defected, appalled by what the movement had become. She told the American consul to Guyana that Jones believed CIA or FBI agents surrounded the camp or that the Guyanese Defense Force stood ready to invade it. Survivors noted that the "white nights," suicide drills, began that summer, ways of slowly normalizing mass suicide into what Jones assured them was a revolutionary act. So too did Russian language and education classes begin, engaging the colony in the distraction of relocation, even though Jones had barely made contact with the Soviet embassy in Georgetown. The drills, the classes, and the prolonged nightly harangues exhausted even the Temple faithful, although accounts tended to divide over whether most of Jones's remaining followers were disgruntled but trapped or still believers near the community's end. In the fall of 1978, Jones sent a subordinate to California to spy on defectors. This spy informed Jones of Ryan's in-

tended visit, prompting a massive shipment of cyanide into the jungle. Former movement people confirmed that Jones claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus or Lenin. His use of drugs escalated, they observed. “White bags filled with pills and medication—mostly Percodan and Valium,” *People* magazine reported, were “with him all the time.” *Time* magazine explained that by the penultimate stage of Jonestown life, its authoritarian leader was beyond rescue, enveloped by a “progressively suicidal depression.”²⁷

Historian Philip Jenkins contends that in the second half of the seventies “many Americans adopted a more pessimistic, more threatening interpretation of human behavior,” an analysis consistent with William Graebner’s observations about the popularity of catastrophe narratives. During the era, Jenkins tells us, “the worst criminals were seen as irrational monsters driven by uncontrollable violence and lust.” Such behavior could not be predicted or controlled by traditional authorities, especially not those trying to observe the spirit and letter of the law. What we today regard as terroristic actions seemed to escalate in the seventies—assassination attempts, serial killers, seemingly random bombings, political kidnappings. Urban crime rates climbed in the 1970s, but scarier were the demented killers, like Charles Manson or New York City’s Son of Sam, who terrorized communities because they were angry, frustrated, or thwarted. Phil Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment (1971) demonstrated that anyone, when given power over others, had the capacity for cruelty. “Since the three terrible assassinations of the 1960s, most Americans seem to have become believers in conspiracy,” political analyst Anthony Lewis noted.²⁸ Many kinds of emotional and irrational frames of reference affected how journalists reported and Americans understood the Jonestown deaths.

Consequently, conspiracy explanations for what happened in Jonestown became “no more far-fetched” than any other to some. Black activist Dick Gregory believed that the CIA and FBI killed everyone in Jonestown, and conspiracy-fancier Peter Beter announced that the U.S. government staged Jonestown to cover up its destruction of a Soviet missile base in Guyana. The anticult activists at the Berkeley-based Human Freedom Center assumed that the U.S. government had managed “a cover-up” in Jonestown, although different people believed in different cover-ups. Some hypothesized that on the final night, part of the community escaped into the jungle but were driven back into the compound “by agents of somebody” and gassed. Others speculated that

the deaths were not self-inflicted but a “horrible government experiment” “to exterminate blacks.”²⁹ Those who advanced the theories were generally outside the mainstream, but nevertheless the press reported them without commentary. Conspiratorial explanations of Jonestown’s end spoke to some individuals’ feelings of utter helplessness.

Even the U.S. government itself seemed to credit some of the conspiracy theories about Jonestown, conceding its inability to protect the communards. The FBI investigated warnings about death squads and hit lists, and a Berkeley Police Department SWAT team surrounded the Human Freedom Center in case of reprisals. Officials worked to squelch rumors that a “Temple security officer known to look like [Jones] . . . may have been murdered in his place,” checking dental records. FBI “fingerprint specialists” confirmed that it was Jones, but “there were a lot of people who thought that Jones did not die in Jonestown and would surface someplace else,” remembered Tony Tamburello, the court-appointed attorney for Congressman Ryan’s alleged shooter. The idea seemed plausible enough that novelist Armistead Maupin built his 1982 book, *Further Tales of the City*, around it. While none of the rumors about look-alike Joneses or “avenging angels” turned out to be true, their wide circulation further undermined general confidence that the full Jonestown story had been told. Six months later, a congressional investigation conceded that only “time may diminish” what many still regarded as a possibility, “that a Peoples Temple death squad” was prepared “to carry out the last wishes of the Rev. Jim Jones.” A year later, a defector assured *NBC Nightly News* that a “hit squad” was just biding its time before coming after people like her.³⁰

In a situation where authorities either would not or could not act, survivors became the heroes, celebrated for their willingness to defy the powerful. In some cases, they almost literally avoided drinking the Kool-Aid. The public celebrated Leo Ryan and the journalists killed alongside him as brave and dedicated, but what really sold newspapers and magazines were the stories of ordinary people who joined the movement, became disillusioned, and escaped it. Their examples provided inspiring tales of, as one reader said, “individual courage and intelligence.” Such stories emphasized the same qualities that made Alex Haley’s ancestors so popular—resistance, determination, powerful senses of identity, and resilience. Virtually every survivor’s story began with a “dream of social equality,” which finally collided with the reality of Jones and Jonestown, prompting escape plots and plans. Survivors and defectors emphasized

the many obstacles they faced: the guards along the commune's perimeter, the possibility that a family member might report even mildly critical complaints about the community, the dangerous jungle surrounding the compound, and the horrifying punishments should you be caught. "How do we get out of Jonestown?," wondered Richard Clark, who used the opportunity of a "day off" during Congressman Ryan's visit to pretend to go on a picnic, carving a path into the jungle that enabled eleven people to escape just before the deaths began. The Parks family planned their escape together for two months, setting aside food and water and scouting an escape route. When the Ryan mission arrived, they asked to leave. Even then, "I never expected to get out alive," one remembered. Patricia Parks, mother of three, was killed while boarding a plane out of Jonestown, but her "children had had the presence of mind to pull up the gangway and lock the door" to protect themselves. Young Tom Bogue asked local Amerindians "to teach him ways to live in the forest." His first escape attempt failed, but what he learned served him well when he and his family left with Ryan. He was wounded during the airstrip shooting but took "flight into the jungle," leading other Jonestown young people safely through the underbrush. These stories were "like thrillers," psychologist Phil Zimbardo noted, but also "hopeful" in that they proved "that people can reject an evil system once they recognize that it is evil."³¹

The Concerned Relatives, who had been invisible before the white night, gained public traction after the fact for their efforts to secure their family members' freedom from Jones. Once written off as "paranoid and crazy" to the few people who had noticed them, they became some of the most compelling experts on Jones's sinister plots. The group, led by Greek-Orthodox-priest-turned-psychologist Steven Katsaris and Tim Stoen, former Temple attorney, had tried both legal and extralegal means to extricate their family members from Jonestown, none of which had interested the press. Katsaris and Stoen traveled to Guyana with Ryan, but not to Jonestown, knowing that Jones would use their presence to deny entrance to the group. Katsaris sent his son in to reason with his sister Maria, one of Jones's much-younger mistresses. Charles Krause found deep humanity in Katsaris's actions, a sort of positive emotionality that contrasted sharply with Jones's paranoia. He "simply wanted Maria to come home," demonstrating the unconditional love of a father for his daughter. Yet Krause also believed that Maria was "old enough to make her own decisions," a pronounce-

ment that summarized the dilemma of political correctness, tolerance over paternalism and protection. Maria Katsaris died at Jonestown after helping to distribute the poison and dispatching armed men with a suitcase full of money from the compound, no ordinary victim, but an accomplice of sorts. Concerned Relatives fought a Quixote-like battle against Jones that, like slave resistances or conservatives' attempts to halt the gay liberation movement, was noteworthy but unlikely to succeed. In any case, the organization's persistence serves as further evidence of the ongoing strength of family in the 1970s.³²

Speaking up for the victims of Jonestown fell, as it did to Katsaris, to their family members. They might be critical of the government, of Jones's attorneys, and of Jones himself, but they had Katsaris's deep unconditional love for their relatives. Their advocacy took the form of insisting that their relations had not committed suicide but instead had been murdered. The press and the public initially described what happened at Jonestown as a mass suicide. The "sect lined up to get poison," the *Los Angeles Times* reported, while the *Chicago Tribune* declared that "religious zealots obediently joined self-proclaimed messiah Jim Jones in a mass ritual of suicide." Almost immediately, however, eyewitnesses challenged the idea that many of the communards drank the Kool-Aid so willingly, and family members of the dead demanded "that the death certificates of the Jonestown tragedy . . . not be written off as suicides/mass suicides . . . only homicide." "Jones ordered cultists to drink cyanide potion," the *Los Angeles Times* later told its readers, while "gunmen prevented escapes." Defectors remembered people arguing against death during suicide drills. "Is it too late for Russia?" a woman asks on a tape of the commune's final hours. She was later found dead with syringe marks on her neck. The few eyewitnesses to the commune's end noted that Jones's henchmen forced the poison down some throats, and journalists who saw bodies said that some had syringes jabbed into them. Nearly everyone pointed out that children could not make informed decisions about suicide. Describing what occurred as murder rather than as suicide gave family members and friends of Jonestown victims at least the consolation that, at the very end, their loved ones were not also fanatics willingly going to their graves on Jones's instruction.³³

Soon the acceptable phrase to describe what occurred in Jonestown was "murder and suicide," a politically correct term that accommodated both agency and Jones's overweening power. Commentators explained

how Jones cunningly gained control over his followers. “In San Francisco, they’d have run,” a psychiatrist explained, “but where the hell were they going to run in Guyana?” Isolation became crucial to any explanation of how Jones stole individual identities. Journalist after journalist used the phrase “concentration camp” to describe Jonestown, implying a set of power dynamics that rendered individuals helpless and without hope. In Jonestown, *Newsweek* said, “every aspect of life” was regulated and controlled. Food became scarce, with residents surviving on “rice and gravy,” which kept them weak. Jonestown was hot, but most people were expected to work in the fields with little rest. “The workday,” *Newsweek* noted, “increased from eight hours to eleven.” In the evenings, Jones made everyone attend meetings, “railing against everything from the white man’s sins in Africa to the venality of some communards who balked at giving him their wristwatches.” There was never time to sleep, to think, to be alone, themes that exposés of the Hare Krishnas or the Unification Church had already introduced to the American public. Communication with the outside world, survivors reported, was impossible. Anyone breaking the rules would be publicly humiliated or privately drugged. Finally, *Newsweek* explained, Jones brought everyone together for “a three-day period of brainwashing and intimidation,” a pilot white night that proved to Jones he could induce people to die for him. Jonestown was supposed to be a utopian colony for Americans disgruntled by their own society. It ended up, virtually everyone agreed, as an extremely dysfunctional and authoritarian community Jones deliberately manipulated to his advantage.³⁴

Altering the mind—brainwashing—became crucial to understanding that tenuous line between suicide and murder, survivors and victims. Survivors, defectors, journalists, even the president, used the word “brainwashing” to describe how Jones took away people’s agency. The American conversation about brainwashing began with the Korean War but reached a pitch in the mid-1970s as an explanation for cults, conspiracies, and “programmed assassins,” like Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, the follower of Charles Manson who attempted to kill Gerald Ford in 1975. It was a common way parents talked to the press about their grown children’s fascinations with extreme movements, and it became family members’ go-to understanding of why their relatives might take poison. One mother of a Temple member who perished described her daughter as “a normal person” before she met Jones, but “like a machine” under his influence. Charles Krause recalled that Congressman

Ryan pointed out a Temple member “almost in a trance. . . . It was an observation I wouldn’t forget.” “He was a robot,” declared the father of Larry Layton, the Temple member charged with Leo Ryan’s murder. Katsaris used the phrase “mind-programmed” to describe his daughter.³⁵ Brainwashing helped relatives of the dead understand why their loved ones might have drunk poison if Jones asked them to, balking perhaps only at that final moment when the full realization of what they were about to do hit them.

The transformation of heiress and college student Patricia Hearst into the self-proclaimed revolutionary Tanya and back again shaped the public discourse about what paralyzed even doubting Temple members, keeping them under Jones’s control. Hearst’s 1974 kidnapping, followed by her participation in Symbionese Liberation Army crimes, her capture, and her trial, dominated the press for years before Jonestown. Stockholm Syndrome, which posited that kidnapped victims eventually accepted their capturers’ beliefs, often was used to explain Hearst’s radical switch. So too might it explain why Temple members believed Jones’s claims about CIA assassins lurking in the bush outside the compound. As William Graebner has noted, “The discussion about whether and how Patty had changed—had she been brainwashed, converted, coerced, persuaded? Had she ‘seen the light’?—took place within the context of a larger, and no less intense, discussion about the nature of human beings, about the self.” Graebner argues that Hearst’s often-unfathomable saga illustrated the idea of the “fragile self” that could be self-actualized for the better or traumatized and brainwashed for the worse. The idea of a constructed self was very much a sixties phenomenon, undergirded by confidence that individuals determined their own paths in life independent of their gender, race, class, or sexual identity. Jim Jones lauded Hearst’s revolutionary transformation, which landed him on a Los Angeles terrorist list. Leo Ryan, who served Hearst’s parents’ district in Congress, by contrast, believed Hearst had been brainwashed and was lobbying Jimmy Carter to commute her prison sentence when he died. “I wept every time I read about Patty Hearst,” the father of Ryan’s killer told a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, “and then it all happened to me.”³⁶

Brainwashing explained, but did not necessarily excuse, what happened to the Jonestown dead. The idea that one could fashion one’s own identity meant that one could make bad choices as well as good ones, and believing Jones’s increasingly crazy claims was a bad choice, despite

the extenuating circumstances, including isolation and brainwashing. Survivors got themselves out of Jonestown alive; victims' bodies had to be transported out, with somebody bearing the cost. A political backlash set in, turning victims into, an angry family member complained, "so many pieces of meat." The Guyanese military began the task of identifying bodies, which were to be buried on-site. But the jungle heat forced a speedup the Guyanese could not handle, and once the U.S. military arrived to assist with counting bodies, the plan changed. Military transport brought bodies to a mortuary in Dover, Delaware, for identification. The choice, according to the government, owed to the location of resources. Family members thought otherwise; they suggested that depositing bodies on the East Coast was cheaper than transporting them to California and also reduced the "chances of families crowding the scene," as the *NBC Nightly News* reported. Family members of the dead were a decided minority bucking politicians eager to rein in the growing cost of getting Jones's victims home to their families. In Dover, the once-solemn process of removing the dead devolved into a political battle. "Who must pay the costs?," wondered the *Chicago Tribune*, of removing and burying the dead, estimated to cost millions of dollars.³⁷

Conservative politicians used the issue to score points with their constituencies about the overreach of government. Senator William Roth of Delaware contacted the secretary of defense and the secretary of state, angry at the prospect that his home state would have to suffer the consequences of "the final chapter of this bizarre tragedy." The state legislature finally passed a bill prohibiting any cremation or burial of a Jonestown body on Delaware soil. The press helped to stir up outrage over "the reported \$10 million cost to the US taxpayers" to bring the bodies home, identify them, and transport them to family members. The Peoples Temple had assets, but San Francisco courts took four years to locate all of them, retrieve them from foreign accounts, and pay out money, much of it to the families of the five victims of the airstrip shootings. Family members failed to step forward because they feared the government would bill them or garnish their wages if they claimed a body. Finally, an interfaith group of clergy arranged for transport to California of the bodies that remained. Cost was not the only reason Americans balked at helping victims' families. Many feared that "kooks coming from out of state to worship these people that killed themselves" would spread the Jonestown craziness like a disease. Better to, as one caller to a Dover radio program suggested, "let this be Cali-

fornia's problem." California cemeteries, however, also did not want the unclaimed bodies. "No way. No Jonestown," one spray-painted sign on the wall of a Marin County cemetery declared. Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland took the unclaimed bodies and buried them in a mass grave with a discreet marker. The prolonged debate dehumanized the dead and turned the burial arrangements into a political circus, although it accurately reflected the distance many individuals wanted to put between themselves and Jones's victims.³⁸

Literal distance became one common way Americans put psychic distance between themselves and the "California crazies" who were more likely to drink the Kool-Aid. Blaming "Cultofornia" explained Jones and what happened at Jonestown, differentiating between ordinary people and the denizens of a state many regarded as anything but ordinary. California had long been an Eden for the discontented. The sixties brought both seekers and people eager to exploit them to California, particularly to the Bay Area, commentators explained. *Time* opined that while San Francisco had once been the "very citadel of culture in California," it had "been scarred repeatedly in recent years by outbreaks of violence and turmoil." In the 1970s, California seemed the place for hedonists, rule breakers, and crazies, the "wonderland of cults." "I Want It All Now" was the title of an NBC news' 1978 story about suburban Marin County, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, suggesting that in the Golden State, narcissism ruled. California represented the "other" in Peoples Temple discourse, that strange place where living was too easy, a "mecca for restless dreamers." "California," *Time* concluded, "has long been fertile ground for cults."³⁹

Cementing San Francisco's reputation as a place of craziness, senseless violence, and evil were the deaths of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and city supervisor Harvey Milk barely a week after Congressman Ryan's death. Some political analysts had credited Jim Jones for providing the margin of victory for Moscone, which Moscone rewarded by appointing Jones to a city position. Both Moscone and Milk owed their political successes to the sixties, while their assassin, former city supervisor Dan White, had been the lone conservative on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. White resigned and then tried to take back his resignation. When the mayor indicated that he intended to appoint someone else to serve out White's term, White grabbed a gun and went after two people whom he perceived as enemies. He later claimed in court that too much junk food had rendered him temporarily insane,

instantly dubbed by journalists the “Twinkie defense.” The story was so unexpected and bizarre that it, like the death of more than 900 followers of a weird fake religious cult that was also associated with San Francisco, could be explained as peculiar to a “sick city cut off from the reality of the rest of the world.”⁴⁰

Psychic distance between oneself and Jones’s victims could also be achieved by stereotyping the Jonestown dead as nonwhite, poor, and uneducated, “simple people with only a rare high school graduate among them,” have-nots “for whom the American promise is ashes,” the “dregs of society.” Reports emphasized the credulous and naive views of Jones’s victims, their belief that he cured their diseases, and their willingness to hand over their Social Security checks or the deeds to their houses. Journalists maintained an “arm’s-length” attitude that turned the dead into “those others” too weak to resist Jones. Defectors, by contrast, always seemed to have college degrees or, in the case of former Temple attorney Tim Stoen, freedom from the daily drudge of Temple work. Their status made it more possible to resist Jones, and their education made them more likely to see through him. Once the group relocated to Jonestown, some stories noted, the wily Jones shifted governance models, replacing the college-educated males who initially served as his lieutenants with young females he had seduced, women reportedly very willing to cater to his needs. Temple defector Deborah Layton later observed that “nobody joins a cult. Nobody joins something they think is going to hurt them.” But Americans wanted desperately to find differences between cult members and what one reporter called “normal people like us.”⁴¹

Looking at government inquiries into the Jonestown tragedy suggests that the victims of Jonestown were not important enough to matter. Each passed the buck to some other part of the government, an outcome many citizens expected. The House Committee on Foreign Relations blamed Jones, the Guyanese government, U.S. Customs for allowing the Temple to ship guns, and the U.S. embassy in Guyana for lacking “common sense.” The public portion of the FBI report “contain[ed] neither recommendations nor conclusions,” just a quick and sometimes inaccurate examination of the facts. A 110-page State Department report criticized U.S. embassy personnel in Guyana for “errors and lapses” and conceded that legal restraints hampered any efforts to challenge Jones but never quite indicated whether improved policies would have made any difference. “There are some things the gov-

ernment can't do for us, and shouldn't even try," concluded syndicated columnist William Raspberry. After Jonestown, Americans with loved ones in other cults hoped there would be more vigilance and regulation, but nothing changed.⁴² A blame-the-victims mentality was beginning to emerge.

Writing from the distance of six months, Diane Johnson noted that the "dismay and pity" the public initially felt for both the dead and the living members of the Peoples Temple gave way to "unspoken anger." The ongoing saga of body removal and burial had something to do with the changing mood, as did the government's unwillingness to acknowledge that it might have exercised more control over the Peoples Temple. Mostly, though, it was "distancing or outrage, even blame," taking place as Americans looked for explanations that reassured that they themselves would never fall under the sway of a "mad Svengali" like Jones. "The push-them-away answer" took many forms, each designed to help establish that the "ugly thing that happened in Guyana" would not happen to reasonable people.⁴³ Such a claim, of course, required that there be something fundamentally different about those who drank the Kool-Aid.

As sympathy gave way to anger and distancing, a common—and very modern—response to the tragedy was humor. Rebecca Moore's two sisters had not yet been identified among the Jonestown dead when, at their Thanksgiving dinner, "half the people were watery-eyed," she noted in her diary, and "the other half made jokes." What a more recent commentator calls the "unfunny joke" became a defense mechanism invoked by people in response to Jonestown, an increasingly familiar cultural trope. Many a disaster movie had its moments of humor, including the 1980 spoof of disaster movies, *Airplane*. Dark humor "changes your perception of the world, and of the official picture of the world," a statement of fearlessness and power. Such humor littered the Jonestown reportage and enhanced journalists' reputations as jaded and professional. Tim Cahill of *Rolling Stone* responded to a persistent rumor "that the Guyanese had considered making Jonestown a tourist attraction" with the question, "What would they call it? Club Dead?" When he first arrived in Guyana to accompany Congressman Ryan to Jonestown, Charles Krause had imagined the tone of what he would write as "farce." Even as the story changed significantly, in some ways Krause's tone did not. Commentators responded with "almost stylized ritual," paying "pro forma lip service" to victims they did not particularly respect. When one

reporter talked to his editor in New York about how much money he was authorized to offer a survivor for an exclusive story, he recorded his editor's reply: "Offer him a glass of Kool-Aid."⁴⁴

Dark humor did not originate in the sixties, but it certainly flourished in the guerrilla theater of antiwar protests and the counterculture's irreverence. In the 1970s, it expressed anti-Establishment feelings and a new freedom to be offensive. One of the most lauded episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* told the story of the death and funeral of a television clown who was killed during a parade by a rogue elephant because he was dressed as a giant peanut. On a television program borne of dark humor, *Saturday Night Live*, cast member Chevy Chase taunted host Richard Pryor with a series of racial epithets. On the University of California's Berkeley campus, undergraduates collected dead baby and Helen Keller jokes for folklorist Alan Dundes. Kurt Vonnegut's novels used environmental tragedies and the World War II bombing of Dresden as settings for humor. Dark humor was brazen and audacious and disrespectful of tradition and authority. It simultaneously demarcated an individual as unique and created a small community of like-minded souls, insiders together thumbing their noses at respectability. Like wearing Birkenstocks before they were mainstream or being the first to discover a new musical group, laughing at potentially offensive jokes helped to establish a person as hip or cool, a trendsetter rather than a follower. Dark humor was a facet of the new post-1960s American. So too was it an expression of independence, acknowledging the contradictions of the world, expressing cynicism, and demonstrating that one was a survivor. It was proof a person was too hard-bitten to drink the Kool-Aid.

References to Kool-Aid took the Jonestown story from the realm of the all-too-real into the absurd, a form of dark humor that, one survivor noted, "trivialize[d] such a horrific event." Kool-Aid represented something artificial, something from baby boomers' childhoods, something banal. People fixated on the Kool-Aid, even though pedants pointed out that what the colony drank was a local variety of the instant drink mix, Flavor-Ade. Several journalists confessed to having taken empty packets as souvenirs. Publicity hound Mark Lane claimed he found four Kool-Aid packets on his front steps when he returned home from Guyana. The *Hollywood Reporter* published an item about a "variety special 'Kool-Aid Presents Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover,'" a "sick joke" snuck in by a disgruntled employee. A cartoon featuring Jones sitting with

Adolf Hitler in what was clearly Hell had Hitler saying, “Kool-Aid! Why didn’t I think of that?” My housemate was not the only college student attending a party with a vat of “jungle juice.” Jungle juice, in fact, is a staple at fraternity and sorority parties even today. Making light of the poison that killed so many, a reporter recently noted, allows for “cultural disassociation and amnesia.”⁴⁵

Tim Cahill, reporting for *Rolling Stone*, began his long Jonestown piece on a darkly humorous note, describing an encounter between himself and someone who drank a different kind of Kool-Aid, a member of the Hare Krishnas he met on his way to Guyana in the Miami airport. “A smiling woman with large, syrupy eyes” asked if he would “like to cough up a donation.” Cahill began taunting her with grotesque images of what was just emerging from the jungle, telling her, “They killed the babies first,” and that human beings had become “thirty or forty tons of rotting meat” “until she ran from me.” While he felt “ashamed,” he was also “full of fierce, brutal joy” that the Krishnas “fled like rats.” The opening defined for his readers how the reporter wanted to be seen, as an outsider, someone way too cynical to ever be caught out by a charlatan like Jones. His presentation likewise suggested to his readers that they might remain detached enough from the tragedy to appreciate its more macabre elements. Some Americans wanted to be “too jaded” to reveal vulnerability. *Saturday Night Live*’s satiric newscast, “Weekend Update,” featured a joke about Jonestown, likening Jim Jones to the host of an absurd television program on which contestants with ridiculous talents could be gonged off the set by celebrity judges. A few members of the studio audience groaned, but most laughed, and they laughed again about a fake news report of the Moscone and Milk shootings. The late 1970s comedic sensibility of sick humor, parody, and satire, even the “anti-comedy” of Andy Kaufman on occasion, provided insulation against some of the shock of 1970s events.⁴⁶ It was a coping mechanism employed by people who valued toughness, agency, and independent thought, people who had been liberated from convention by the sixties. Americans were moving toward a new type of persona, one for whom irony was a central personality trait.

Two years after the Jonestown deaths, a renewed spate of books and survivor accounts began to appear. Reviewing them for the *New York Review of Books*, Diane Johnson found their collective tone “finally blackly comic.”⁴⁷ Even today, the defiant, I-wouldn’t-drink-the-Kool-Aid attitude continues, expressed by bands like the Brian Jonestown Massacre,

a blog called “Odd Things I’ve Seen,” which includes a visit to Evergreen Cemetery, or photos of Jonestown dead on the “Best Gore” website. The Temple’s San Francisco church is now a branch of the U.S. Post Office; locals boast proudly of its previous incarnation. The mass gravesite at Evergreen draws occasional curiosity seekers but none of the fanatics the good citizens of Delaware feared it would. A few years ago, several sets of Jonestown remains surfaced at a mortuary in Delaware, which the press found somehow symbolic of the government’s lack of respect for the Temple dead. Our attitudes toward Jonestown have not really changed. We continue to approach human tragedy with a mixture of panic, curiosity, cynicism, and, finally, often-amused detachment, as though we are still trying to demonstrate that what happened to the more than 900 communards of Jonestown could never happen to us.

Public reportage of the Jonestown tragedy reflected many contemporary themes, including anti-Establishment feelings, general anti-Establishment attitudes, suspicion of lawyers, a shift toward less-rational ways of thinking, and the reemergence of evil as a potent social belief, already embodied by mass murderers and cult leaders and soon to be identified with America’s cold war enemy, the Soviet Union. But the warning “Don’t drink the Kool-Aid” and its opposite, “He/she drank the Kool-Aid,” emphasize a very 1970s lesson: that people ought to think for themselves. Being susceptible to drinking the Kool-Aid—any Kool-Aid—made people vulnerable and easily exploited. Having the wherewithal to stand apart from a situation and assess it for what it truly was, to defy authority figures, be they presidents, bosses, teachers, or cult leaders, was necessary for survival. Tim Cahill started his piece on Jonestown with cynicism and dark humor but ended it on a more affirmative note, celebrating “the resilience of the human spirit.” What gave him hope were not all those bodies rotting in the jungle but the stories of the survivors, the people who resisted Jones, fought back, and came out of the experience with their identities intact, despite the many horrors visited upon them.⁴⁸ The themes of resistance and resilience run throughout the Jonestown story, whether you focus on the anti-Establishment reporters chasing the scoop, the relatives who battled cults and demanded dignity for their lost family members, or the survivors of the tragedy themselves. This independent-thinking, assertive, ideal human being stands in stark contrast to pre-sixties’ America.

Yet, paradoxically, the Jonestown story is also an affirmation of community. It warned of the dangers of too-powerful leaders when individu-

als cede control over their destinies. It passed judgment on community dysfunction and revealed the dynamics of healthy ones. It celebrated the families who got out of Jonestown, the professional community of reporters who tended one another on the airstrip in the jungle, and the families and friends who advocated for the victims and helped one another cope with a horrible event. Even Jones's attorneys put aside their machinations long enough to work together to escape Jonestown. The post-sixties American ideal was both independent and communal, bound to a country from which many wanted distance but also nurture and protection. Many of the Jonestown communities were constructed or imagined ones, professional organizations or groups like the Concerned Relatives, whose members shared little beyond rather personal and private concerns. Some were even extreme communities, cults. Like constructed families, seventies communities emphasized diversity, tolerance, and individual strength. Whether or not they were successful at this task, their purpose was to provide both protection and support as individuals moved from their old lives into their new ones.