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Jonestown: A Paradise Lost

An Investigation of Jim Jones and the People's Temple

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Dr. Ryan Burge

"What you need to believe in is what you can see ... If you see me as your friend, I'll be your friend. As you see me as your father, I'll be your father, for those of you that don't have a father ... If you see me as your savior, I'll be your savior. If you see me as your God, I'll be your God."

–Reverend Jim Jones, Founder and Leader of the People’s Temple – Jonestown: Paradise Lost

November 18, 1978: a date which, to some, remains in infamy. On this day, Jim Jones, leader of the Peoples Temple, a fanatical cult based on love, equality and prosperity, led a mass suicide of 918 people at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project (Jonestown) in Guyana. Also, Jones organized the murder of California US Congressman Leo Ryan, as well as some of his companions, at the Port Kaiatuma Airstrip. This massacre remains the only time a US congressman has been killed in the line of duty, as well as holding the unfortunate status of largest loss of American civilian life in a non-natural disaster, only eclipsed by the events of 9/11.

Jim Jones was a madman, a hypnotist, and a devilishly convincing preacher, joining the ranks of Charles Manson and David Koresh. He taught equality, social justice, and emphasized a Marxist, Socialist society in the most extreme ways possible. As fanatical as his methods and teachings were, the allure of his “Peoples Temple” can be attributed to the counter religious movement of the 1960s. The flower power, anti-war, “down with the man and God” movement contained a lot of easily malleable minds; minds that ranged from those who felt they didn’t belong to those who thought no one understood them. Jones’s methods of recruitment played upon the ideas that he would be there for his people when others would not. His workings in California during this “Religious Aftershock” saw temple membership increase, as did his “cult

of personality.” In order to analyze how Jonestown came to be, and what led people to join this farfetched cult, one must look at the early pastoral beginnings of the man in charge of it all: Jim Jones.

The Early Years of Jim Jones

Jim Jones was born on May 13, 1931 in Crete, Indiana. His father was a WWI veteran with disabilities and his mother was a well liked member of the community. From an early age, Jones was fascinated by religion, being molded by the various churches and beliefs he experimented with. One person who Jones was involved with was a "fanatical" woman evangelist, who was the leader of faith-healing revivals at the Gospel Tabernacle Church on the edge of Crete. The Gospel Tabernacle Church was a Pentecostal sect of "Holy Rollers," a charismatic group who believed in faith-healing and speaking in tongues, much like modern day Pentecostals. (Hougan 2012) Through experiences such as this, Jones became evangelized and by 1947, he was preaching in a "sidewalk ministry" on the wrong side of the tracks in Richmond, Ind.---sixteen miles from his home. (Hougan 2012) In 1951, Jones moved to Indianapolis to pursue his studies at Butler University. Also around this time, Jones's ideas about a future religious order would start to come about, namely due to his fascinations towards Communism.

Jones found fascination with the methods of Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin. During his time at Butler, Jones attended Communist meetings and rallies. The "2nd Red Scare" at the time and the following tribunals of Sen. Joseph McCarthy were strong reasons as to why Jones grew irritated with how Communists were treated in American society. An FBI tape transcript notes that an irritated Jones asked himself, "How can I demonstrate my Marxism? The thought was, infiltrate the church. So I consciously made a decision to look into that pro— that prospect.

(Jones 1977)” By 1952, Jones had given up his studies and decided to become a minister, building upon the evangelization he had received as a child. He harnessed his newfound goal of spreading his Marxist religious thought by establishing the Community Unity Church in 1954. His church would change names many times until it was established as the Peoples Temple Christian Church Full Gospel, or Peoples Temple, in 1956.

Early Years of the Peoples Temple

Jones’ Peoples Temple was based on the idea of large conventions, much like Pentacostalism. Thousands of people would attend these events, witnessing such things as mass healings and “miraculous” interpretations of the personal details of people, such as their birthdays or social security numbers. Jones would fabricate these events by hiring private investigators to divulge personal information or have members close to him act out being “healed.” The Temple was also interracial, which was very significant given the racial tensions of the era. Jones emphasized equality and brotherhood, performed acts of community service, and admitted people to the Temple regardless of their social class or place in society. His preaching and community outreach led to Temple membership reaching around 2000 by the end of the 1950s. (Hougan 2012) Integration would prove to be a very influential factor in Jones’ Peoples Temple, especially concerning his so-called “Rainbow Family.”

The “Rainbow Family” was the Peoples Temple, namely Jones’ own adopted children, who were mostly non-Caucasian. The children were from many ancestries, such as Korean, Native American and African American. Jones and his wife, Marceline, did have one biological son: Stephen Ghandi Jones, in 1959. (Wessinger 2000, 52) Soon after their son Stephen was born, Jones took his family to Brazil, seeking asylum from a possible nuclear threat to the United

States, as well as attempting to establish the Temple there. It was during his trip to Brazil that Jones first visited Guyana, and the experience would mold him into believing that in order to save himself and his followers, they had to move from their current location in Indiana. Upon his return to the US in 1965, mainly due to the Temple's quickening collapse, he said to his followers that the world would be engulfed in a nuclear war on July 15, 1967. Jones prophesized that the war would create a new socialist "Eden" on Earth, and he led approximately 140 members, half of whom were black, to Redwood Valley in July 1965 and officially opened church in Ukiah, in Northern California, in order to remain safe. (Lindsay 1978) This was the start of Jones' California Ministry, which would greatly expand into the 1970s, drawing on people involved in the religious counterculture of the 1960s.

The Counter Religious Movement of the 1960s: Fodder for Jones' Temple

The Counter Religious Movement of the 1960s can be classified as the distancing of people from religious affiliation in fields such as attendance and practice. This movement matched the consistency of the 1960s: anti-establishment, anti-war and anti-law. With the civil rights movement in full swing, and Vietnam plaguing the nation abroad, America was in a moral dilemma. The "Religious Aftershock" of the 1970s caused a growing number of people to embrace religion once more. Figure 1 highlights the changes in the youthful rejection of religious identity.

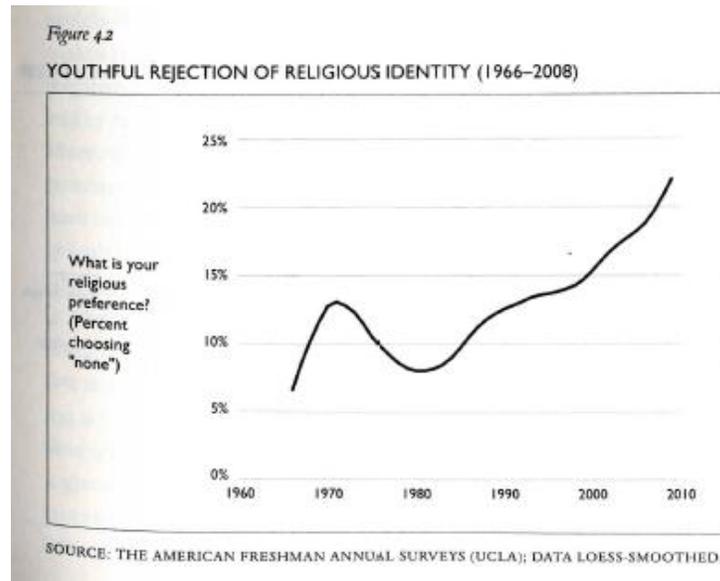


Figure 1 Source: Putnam and Campbell Ch.4 – 2012

We can see that the number of youths choosing no religious preference hits its peak in 1970, but was relatively low in 1965 and 1975. This coincides with Jones' ministry and his Temple's growing membership. Many people were desperate to be accepted, such as college students, minorities and people down on their luck. These sorts of people were ripe for the picking for Jim Jones. They were in desperate need of someone who would be there for them, regardless of who they were. Jones' preaching catered to this, and in one of his sermons in California, he said,

“I represent divine principles, total equality and a society where people hold all things in common, where there is no rich or poor, where there are no races. Wherever there are people striving for justice and righteousness, there I am! And there I am involved.

(American Experience 2007)”

Jones' way of speaking was inspired by one of his idols, Father Divine, who spoke the same way to his black congregation. Those who believed in Jones and his preachings made up the majority of those who followed Jones into California, and well as those who already lived in California.

Peoples Temple in California

Jones' ways of teaching in California derived from his understanding of Socialism. Preaching at the main headquarters in Redwood Valley, Jones slowly began to grow tired of American society as he saw it, stating that "If you're born in capitalist America, racist America, fascist America, then you're born in sin. But if you're born in socialism, you're not born in sin. (Jones 1977)" He also began to degrade Christianity (and the Bible) as proponents of the subjugation of women and colored people. In one sermon, Jones spoke against the Bible, saying, "You're gonna help yourself, or you'll get no help! There's only one hope of glory; that's within you! Nobody's gonna come out of the sky! There's no heaven up there! We'll have to make heaven down here! (American Experience 2007)"

His followers believed him in everything he did. The question is: Why did they? Jones's charisma, manipulative tactics and ways of preaching drew people of all walks of life into his Temple. His message of understanding and compassion and equality would only grow stronger when he moved the Peoples Temple headquarters to San Francisco in 1975.

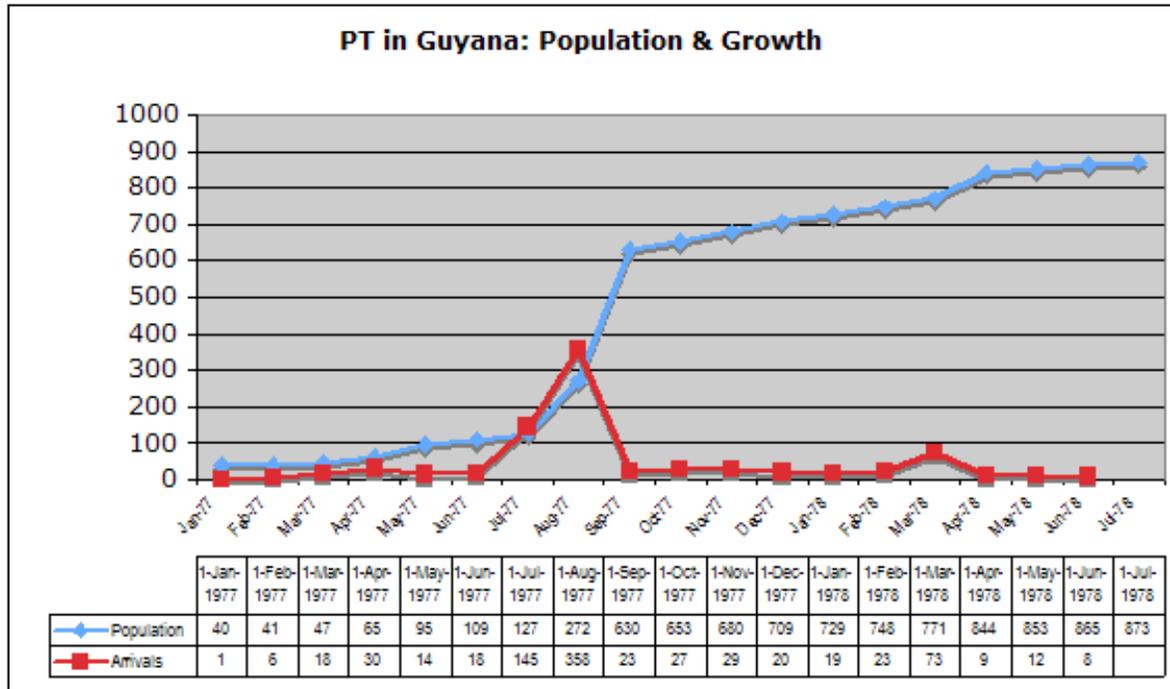
The move to San Francisco invigorated Jones' political career. After the Temple served an important role in the mayoral election victory of George Moscone in 1975, Moscone appointed Jones as the Chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission. (American Experience 2007) This was but one of the ways Jones built support for his temple. He had the support from many prominent politicians, such as Walter Mondale and Harvey Milk. Their views of the temple were of utmost praise; however, they did not know what was happening behind the scenes.

Jim Jones believed that all people were homosexual except him. He thought that their wants of sexual desire were just “cover-ups” to hide their true feelings. Jones himself had sexual relations with men and women, regardless of his marital status; his mind told him that this was what was best for the people. (American Experience 2007) He also expressed the want to travel to other socialist countries with his people, in order to escape American oppression, as he believed. The abuse Jones performed on certain Temple members was documented and set to be published in the San Francisco Chronicle. (Kilduff 1977, 31) However, Jones would take himself, his family and many of his followers to Guyana, fulfilling his idea to leave the United States and go to a community where all of his Temple could live in peace: Jonestown.

Jonestown

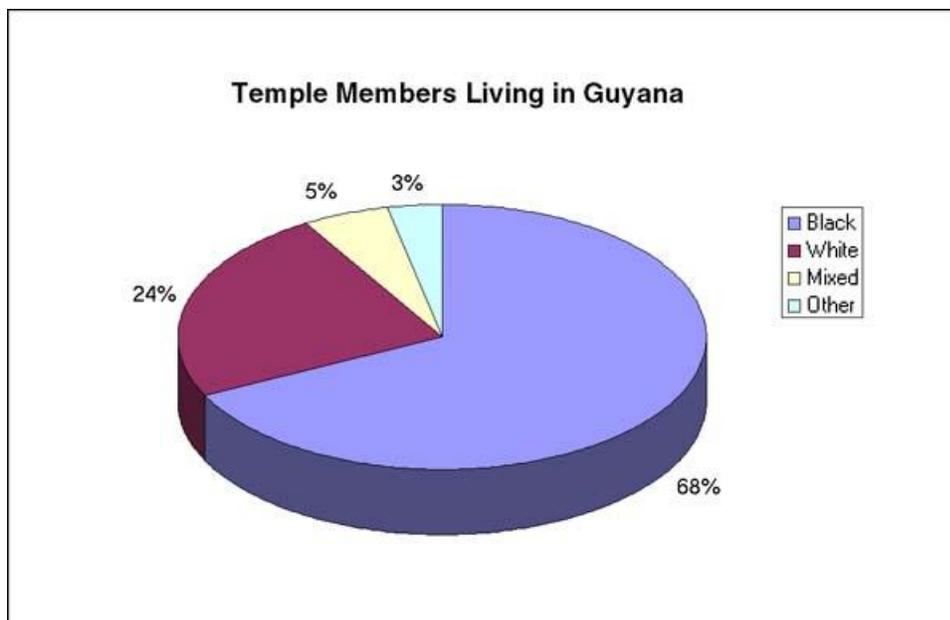
Temple members established the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project (Jonestown) in Guyana in 1970. Only a few Temple members actually resided there, but when Jones decided to flee there in 1977 to avoid possible persecution, the population of Jonestown greatly increased. Figure 2 below shows the amount of people living and moving to Guyana from January 1977 to July 1978.

Figure 2



Source: Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University

We can see that from a modest number of people (50) in 1977, the population rose to as high as about 900 people in 1978. Jonestown was seen as a paradise: a way to get away from the persecution and troubles of the world at large. Jones primarily chose Guyana due to its socialist leanings. The people of Jonestown worked as farmers, growing crops and schooling the children born at the settlement. Jones himself acted as a father figure, delivering sermons and overseeing the agricultural and architectural work at Jonestown. He also “claimed” certain children as his own, under the belief that he was the father to whomever was there with him at Jonestown. The people settling at Jonestown made the best of what they had in the hot climate of Guyana. Figure 3 below shows the demographics of people living at Jonestown.

Figure 3

Source: Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University

The people settling at Jonestown were primarily black. Most of them were recovering from drug abuse or believed they were being unjustly treated in American society. Regardless, they believed wholeheartedly in Jones' promise of a Socialist utopia on Earth. However, Jonestown was far from it.

Temple members living in Jonestown described how strictly regulated it was there. Members were unable to leave, and were under constant watch by Jones' personal elite. Also, Jones, in his paranoia, held multiple "white nights" to respond to an emergency. These events were paramount to Jones' control over the people, where he would give them four choices: (1) attempt to flee to the Soviet Union; (2) commit "revolutionary suicide"; (3) stay in Jonestown and fight the purported attackers or (4) flee into the jungle. (Jones 1977) He used the power of fear to coax his followers, making claims that there were concentration camps and people

waiting to jail them and take their children away. (History 2007) The slow maddening of Jim Jones became even more exaggerated when US Congressman Leo Ryan announced that he was going to visit Jonestown to see what it was for himself. The events put into motion by this action would forever engrain themselves in the psyche of those who witnessed it.

The Congressman's Visit

Congressman Ryan decided to visit Jonestown due to the complaints of concerned relatives of those in Jonestown, as they had heard of the conditions in Jonestown. Also, the amount of defectors further gave Ryan the cause to visit Jonestown himself. On November 14, 1978, Ryan flew to Georgetown, Guyana, the capital of Guyana and 150 miles from Jonestown. He traveled along with a team of 18 people consisting of government officials, media representatives and some members of the Concerned Relatives. The group included Congressman Ryan; Ryan's legal adviser, Jackie Speier ;Richard Dwyer, Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy to Guyana; Tim Reiterman, *San Francisco Examiner* reporter; Don Harris, NBC reporter; Greg Robinson, *San Francisco Examiner* photographer; Steve Sung, NBC audio technician; Bob Flick, NBC producer; Charles Krause, *Washington Post* reporter; Ron Javers, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter; Bob Brown, NBC video operator; and Concerned Relatives representatives, including Tim and Grace Stoen, Steve and Anthony Katsaris, Beverly Oliver, Jim Cobb, Sherwin Harris, and Carolyn Houston Boyd. (American Experience, History 2007) The Ryan delegation arrived into Jonestown to a somewhat unwelcome atmosphere. However, the denizens did eventually act friendly to Ryan and his group. The group did not know that Jones had run rehearsals on how to convince Ryan's delegation that everyone was happy and in good spirits. (Hall 1987, 271)

Marceline Jones, Jim Jones' wife, showed the delegation around the settlement, highlighting the numerous kids born at Jonestown and the agricultural progress made at Jonestown. Congressman Ryan was also approached by those who wished to defect back to the United States. Jones was extremely unhappy with this, questioning those who wished to defect and urging that the delegation "just leave us. Please, just leave us." Jones told the reporters following Ryan that, like others who left the community, the defectors would "lie" and destroy Jonestown. (Reiterman 2008, 515) Once Congressman Ryan had processed some of the defectors, a man, Don Sly, grabbed the Congressman and wielded a knife. Temple members were able to rustle Sly down, but Congressman Ryan knew he had to leave. Before he left, a Temple loyalist, Larry Layton, joined the group, drawing the suspicion of many defectors. (History 2007)

The Port Kaiatuma Shootings

Following his visit, Congressman Ryan and his group traveled back to the Port Kaiatuma airstrip, where they had to wait for their planes to arrive. Once they had started boarding the planes, Larry Layton, the most recent Temple defector, produced a firearm and began shooting those around him and injured some of the defectors. At this time, a tractor came driving onto the airstrip and blocked off the planes' path. Multiple men came off of the tractor and began to shoot at the planes. After a few minutes, Congressman Ryan, cameraman Bob Brown, photographer Greg Robinson, NBC reporter Don Harris and Temple defector Patricia Parks were dead. Jackie Speier, Steve Sung, Richard Dwyer, Tim Reiterman and Anthony Katsaris were among the nine injured and fled into the Guyanese jungle. (History 2007)

End of the Peoples Temple

By the time of the shootings, Jones' grip on sanity had started to unravel. Once the Congressman had left, he called one final "white night" drill. This one, however, was the culmination of all the practice the previous drills had instilled in the people of Jonestown. Jones preached to the assembled crowd,

"Now what's going to happen here in a matter of a few minutes is that one of those people on that plane is gonna -- gonna shoot the pilot. I know that. I didn't plan it, but I know it's going to happen. They're gonna shoot that pilot, and down comes that plane into the jungle. And we had better not have any of our children left when it's over, because they'll parachute in here on us. (Jones 1978)"

Soon after this, Jones received word about the shootings at Port Kaiatuma. It was then that Jones ordered his followers to get ready to kill themselves. Some temple members expressed an unwillingness to die, instead opting to flee to the Soviet Union. However, Jones and some of the followers said that suicide was how real Socialists would die, and one temple member exclaimed, "Let's make it a beautiful day. (History 2007)" Kool-Aid, poisoned with cyanide, was administered to every member around the central pavilion. Some people were reluctant to take the poison after seeing the effects on other members. However, no one was safe from the poison administration, save for a few Temple members who hid during the mass suicide. Jones, seeing his members dying and screaming, consoled them by saying,

"Die with a degree of dignity. Lay down your life with dignity; don't lay down with tears and agony. I tell you, I don't care how many screams you hear, I don't care how many anguished cries...death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life. If you

knew what was ahead of you – if you knew what was ahead of you, you'd be glad to be stepping over tonight. (Jones 1978)"

Once everyone had taken the poison and were dying from its effects, Jim Jones sat down in his chair, surveyed his former Temple, took out a gun, and shot himself in the head. On that day, November 18, 1978, 918 people were killed. It was the single greatest loss of American life in a non natural disaster until the events of 9/11. With this event, the gruesome chapter of the Rev. Jim Jones came to an end. However, what brought about the events of Jonestown and Jim Jones' actions has remained a popular topic in literature in the years following the massacre.

Jonestown and the Peoples Temple: Aftermath

Trying to decipher the motives and events of Jim Jones and Jonestown is a very hard question. However, scholars have attempted to look at how the Temple was organized and how Jones was influential. Linda Sargent Wood, reviewer of *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* by Rebecca Moore, wrote that Moore argued the point that the Peoples Temple “reflected the era’s countercultural, anti-capitalistic, and multiracial values. Although driven by a paranoid leader, most members were not brainwashed fanatics but individuals intent on creating a just society. (Wood 2010, 475)”. John Walliss, reviewer of *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, also by Rebecca Moore, noted Moore’s argument that “around 70 percent of those who died in Jonestown were black and, prior to that, 90 percent of its membership in California had been African American. (Walliss 2006, 124)”

Some scholars attempted to analyze Jones’ preachings and his influence upon temple members. John Hall, reviewer of *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* by David Chidester, wrote that Chidester believed that “Jones's

sermons were hardly the incoherent ramblings of a mad-man. Jones invoked his own life as a "superhuman" intervention intended to salvage his followers from "subhuman" existence in the face of racism, classism, and sexism. (Hall 1989, 634)" Likewise, Doyle Paul Johnson, author of *Dilemmas of Charismatic Leadership: The Case of the People's Temple*, theorizes that Jones' sermons and actions at Jonestown fit the mold of a charismatic leader, explaining that "charismatic leaders are extremely vulnerable to erosion of their outstanding claims and to consequent loss of their influence. Just as leaders in other institutional contexts, charismatic leaders seek ways to reinforce their power and to overcome its precariousness. (Johnson 1979, 322)" Joel Greenberg, author of *Jim Jones: The Deadly Hypnotist*, supports the claim of Jones' devilish charisma by stating that Jones employed many means of political control, such as "control of his followers' property and income; weakening family ties; institution of a sociopolitical caste; and cognitive and emotional control of the mind. (Greenberg 1979, 379)"

Building upon the idea of charisma, some scholars go as far as to analyze the charismatic way the Peoples Temple made money through its members. John Hall, author of *Collective Welfare as Resource Mobilization in Peoples Temple: A Case Study of a Poor People's Religious Social Movement*, argues that

"despite the apocalyptic and world-transforming orientation in the group, or more precisely, because of it, Temple staff were able to exhort followers to maximize donations. This was possible at the level it occurred only because the Temple offered substantial benefits in return-a communal ark of salvation that not only provided for members' personal needs, but also "fronted" for them in the complex array of Social Security and other welfare bureaucracies. That members had invested so much-often their

life savings-in the Temple as their whole future represents one basis for that group's effective charismatic claim on their allegiance even in the face of zealous opposition, even to the point of mass suicide. (Hall 1988, 76S)”

Conclusion

No one will ever forget the tragic events that took place at Jonestown. Scholars and students both wonder how perfectly rational people could fall under the hypnotic cult that was Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple. His hypnotism, charisma, speaking ability and charm were directly responsible for the 918 people he killed that day. To the people who followed him: He was their Messiah, their Savior, their Father and their friend, being there for them when no one else would. To everyone else, Jim Jones was an insane cultist who promoted an ideology which dragged 918 people to their doom. Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple will forever serve as a constant reminder that people, no matter where they come from, can be indoctrinated and pushed to believe whatever you want them to believe; if you know how to manipulate their emotions. The Jonestown Massacre remains an example of a “Paradise Lost.”

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