



Jonestown: Perpetrators and Victims

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Review of *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of Jim Jones* by James Reston, Jr.

“For in the end, they were not victims, but perpetrators.” So says James Reston, Jr. in his book *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of Jim Jones*. What were the tragic deaths of over 900 of Jones’s followers? Were they suicides as the media reported at the time or were they in fact murdered at the hands of a madman?

Before reading Reston’s text I firmly believed the incident was murder. It is obvious to me that these people would have not chosen to die on November 18, 1978 if Jim Jones has not thrust death upon them. Without him they would have gone on teaching their children and living out their agricultural project. I believe without him their dream of living out a utopia almost existed. However, the instability of Jones’ personality made the community unlivable. Nevertheless, they were the ones who made Jones a god and supported his folly. One would not have existed without the other. Jim Jones created their utopia and they created Jim Jones.

Jim Jones enjoyed a stronghold over his people. He was god to them, an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-reaching entity who could reach you no matter where you went to on this planet. By depriving them of sleep, individuality, and amity with each other he broke them as surely as the tyrants who imposed themselves upon the communist party states of East Europe. They depended on Jones for everything: housing, food, protection from a world he told them was rapidly deteriorating. He rehearsed suicide drills several times. They were at a point where they could hardly think or function. And they couldn’t escape. He brought them to a promised land where they could not leave. They were in the middle of a wild jungle. There was nowhere to go. They were told that the government officials who came into the camp were in Jones’s pocket. There was no help in any direction.

Then was a visit by Congressman Leo Ryan. A brave few took a risk and asked to leave. The few became many as more and more people rose to leave. And a storm came to Jonestown.

First, there were attacks on the defectors, the newsman and the congressman. Those actions left victims on the airfield in Port Kaituma.

Back at the Jonestown compound, the situation had deteriorated further. Someone prepared the poison. It was placed in syringes. The first to go were the children. Again, they were obviously victims.

It is when we consider the Jonestown adults that we have to question their victim status. How responsible are they for own their deaths?

On one hand, all were manipulated to get to Jonestown and in that sense were victims.

On the other, all chose to be involved with Jim Jones thus making them perpetrators of the atrocity that followed.

After the deaths of over 300 children some poor hopeless souls may have taken the poison by choice. Others may have taken it at gunpoint. Others took it by force. Some were shot. (Less than ten autopsies were performed on the bodies taken from Jonestown.)

While I still lean towards the idea that these individuals were victims, I can see Reston's point of view that they were perpetrators. At least some responsibility must be assigned to them. In his text, he focuses his reasoning mostly on the fact that no one fights back as reasoning for them being perpetrators. Although it may have been deadly, how many lives may have been saved if one had turned over the vat of poison? Such a simple idea, with amazing consequences, yet no one even tried to do it. The masses could have overwhelmed the few; yet they allowed their lives to be taken.

Either way the point seems moot. It is so unfair in the end.

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