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Ryan aide discounts 'Jonestown mythology'

By Miles White

A top aide to the late Congressman Leo J. Ryan (D-Calif.), who was killed in 1978 when he went to Guyana to investigate the Rev. Jim Jones and his People's Temple religious movement, has discounted as "mythology" that more than 900 followers of Jones—most of whom were black—voluntarily committed suicide on order of the charismatic leader.

In an interview with the WASHINGTON AFRO-AMERICAN last week, Joe Holsinger, Ryan's chief administrative assistant, outlined information which he says indicates the existence of a covert Central Intelligence Agency operation in Guyana that had not been reported to congressional oversight committees.

Further, Holsinger said he now believes in the "horrifying possibility" that Jonestown was part of a "mass mind control experiment" by the CIA as part of its MK ULTRA program, which was supposedly terminated in the early 1970s.

MK ULTRA was the secret code name for research the CIA organized in the early 1950s to search for ways to control the human mind. That research included experiments using various mind control techniques and drugs, and in most cases was conducted unknowingly on American citizens.

Former CIA Director Richard Helms told a Senate committee in 1974, however, that the mind control experiments had been discontinued by the agency and that all records pertaining to it had been destroyed.

But instead of terminating the MK ULTRA program, Holsinger said, the CIA simply shifted its programs from public institutions to private organizations. The experimentation into mind control was previously done in federal and state penitentiaries and in some government-run hospitals.

Holsinger, who has been pressuring for a congressional investigation into CIA involvement with the settlement, believes that Ryan's visit to the ill-fated colony may have pierced the veil of secrecy surrounding alleged CIA activities there, and would have eventually exposed them.

That may have led government authorities or CIA officials to decide to wipe out the entire settlement rather than risking the confidential nature of the operation, Holsinger feels.

"One year (after the Jonestown massacre) I began to realize that our government had constructed and passed along a carefully fabricated version of Jonestown to the news media," he said. "That version has come to be accepted as 'fact' by the American people."

Holsinger, in speaking to a group of black psychologists and sociologists last May, said he was "troubled by the general public impression left over from Jonestown, which is that of a large group of disturbed and foolish black people who turned their backs on this country and then killed themselves—so good riddance."

The House Foreign Affairs Committee last year conducted a six-month investigation into the Jonestown settlement, but said it found no evidence of CIA involvement there.

But the committee later ordered another investigation to be done by the House Intelligence Committee after allegations persisted that the agency had conducted the illegal operation in violation of the Hughes-Ryan Act,

which the slain California congressman co-authored.

A preliminary inquiry was recently begun by the intelligence committee, and a report is expected soon, but it is doubtful whether its findings will do more than robber stamp the previous investigation.

Holsinger testified before a congressional committee last February that he believed the CIA was in "effective control" of the State Department embassy in Guyana, and that it conducted a covert operation there to protect U.S. commercial interests and to maintain the government of Prime Minister Forbes Burnham.

Burnham is considered a favored U.S. ally and was helped to power in Guyana by CIA conducted covert operations there after the previous Marxist government was toppled.

At least two persons close to Jones, Richard Dwyer, the deputy chief of mission in Guyana at the time of the massacre, and George Phillip Blakey, who served as a mercenary recruiter in Angola for UNITA, have been identified as CIA operatives.

Holsinger said his belief that Jonestown was a CIA backed experiment that was destroyed in order to prevent its exposure is supported, he says, by the chief medical examiner in Guyana, Dr. Leslie Mootoo, who reported that more than 700 of the bodies found at Jonestown were not suicide victims, but were murdered.

"My acquaintanceship with black families and my sense of the love that flows from black parents to their children make it impossible for me to believe that the Jonestown mass-suicides could have happened as reported," Holsinger said.

Holsinger also hinted at the possibility that Ryan, because of his interest in Jonestown, "had been led into, or allowed to fall into, a death trap."