

# Guyana's chaotic legacy

**F**orbes Burnham — The President, The Leader, The Redeemer — died on Aug. 6 in Guyana. Abroad, few noticed; but to Guyana's people the news brought hope that somehow deliverance from 21 years of jungle Marxism, black racism and terror might be at hand.

"A tract of land perched uneasily on the shoulder of South America," is how the brilliant Trinidadian writer, Shiva Naipaul, describes Guyana. Its 800,000 people, a discordant mixture of blacks, East Indians and Asians, clings to the coast; in the vast interior, trackless jungles blend southward into the Amazon. Rich in promise, Guyana is today dirt poor and getting worse.

I am writing about Burnham and his black power movement because their lugubrious tale offers some useful lessons. When Britain granted self-government in 1964, the nation was reasonably prosperous and blessed with democratic government, a free press and fair courts. In short order, first the East Indian leader, Cheddi Jagan, an avowed communist, and then his successor Burnham, utterly destroyed Guyana's democratic institutions.

Burnham, reputed to have been a member of the British Communist Party, quickly moved to ensure his rule would be perpetual. Elections were rigged, voters intimidated and opposition figures murdered, cowed into silence or forced into exile. Goon squads, known as the "House of Israel," enforced the will of the Redeemer and created Guyana's only growth industry, Burnham's cult of personality.

Having destroyed Guyana's democracy, Burnham next turned to the national economy, applying to it a farrago of Third World voodoo economics and mutant Marxism. Almost everything was nationalized, collectivized and put under management of party thugs. Enormous bureaucracies of immense corruption and towering inefficiency were placed in

## Punch



"I took a long, hard look at my life and decided I needed more fiber."

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



charge of business, small and large, as well as agriculture and mining.

In short order, the economy collapsed into rubble; people with brains and money fled while the less fortunate were left to live on a daily diet of Afro-Marxist mumbo-jumbo and fear. To quote Naipaul, writing of a fictional Guyana, "There they were: A people trapped in the sun-stunned vacuum separating ocean from jungle."

Strange cultists and Third World fakirs poured into a welcoming Guyana. Prominent among them, Rev. Jim Jones and his holy death camp, Jonestown, where 900 deluded Americans were to end their pitiful lives by drinking fruit punch laced with cyanide. Southern California cultism blended in a weird and fitting symbiosis with Guyana's Afro-Marxism.

As things in Guyana went from bad to worse and the nation began rapidly returning to the jungle, Burnham's response was to blame it all on "capitalist-imperialists," savage anyone who spoke against him, and to draw Guyana ever closer to its new friends, Cuba and Russia, both of whom were busy trying to create a Caribbean Marxist alliance between Guyana, neighboring Surinam and Grenada. Hardly a week passed in Georgetown, the decaying capital, without some sort of Third World Marxist group denouncing western imperialism. Talk became the nation's principal product.

Burnham's outpouring of hatred against imagined capitalist bogeymen mirrored the attitude of so many Third World leaders who, unable to cope with their own incompetence and failure, had to find a scapegoat. With amazing clarity and foresight, Naipaul wrote Burnham's epithet two years ago in his book, *A Hot Country*: "They . . . looked into themselves — and what did they find? Nothing! A void. Darkness. Unspecified hunger . . . they did not have a self, a soul to call their own. It was a terrible discovery which they sought to disguise by displays of frenzy, by their wild dreams of a return to Africa, by their ecstatic and compulsive sloganeering."

Capturing the bleak essence of Third Worldism, Naipaul continues, "Before this delirium, freedom, justice, equality and brotherhood melted away into spectral absurdity. The only desire left was the desire to destroy."

What will happen now to poor, tatterdemalion Guyana? A new President, Desmond Hoyte, of unknown character or endurance has taken over. The goon squads, with their Cuban advisers are still there. Many Guyanese are praying for deliverance, perhaps even a miracle — rescue by the U.S. and Canada from their long, sad night of darkness. What was once called Britain's fairest West Indian colony today lies in ruin after only 21 years of independence.