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There was a sound like a shot being fired. Each member of The Beatles looked at each other, wondering which of them had been hit. A wave of protests had spread across the American Bible belt in response to an interview in which John Lennon had claimed that the Beatles were 'bigger than Jesus', and there had been warnings and threats from groups including the Ku Klux Klan. Now, on stage at the Memphis Coliseum, it seemed that their worst nightmare had come true.

But the sound was only from a firecracker and, as it turned out, was to be the least dangerous thing to happen to the band on what would be their final tour of the US. The band narrowly avoided being electrocuted in Cincinnati when a thunderstorm threatened to strike the open-air baseball stadium while they were performing. Every night was a battle to get to and from each venue, pursued by legions of Beatlemaniacs. On the journey to the final gig at San Francisco's Candlestick Park, the band resolved that it was time to stop touring.

Key among the factors that led to the decision were the three crises that hit the Beatles in 1966, of which the 'bigger than Jesus' controversy was one. For the Fab Four, already jaded by almost constant touring since the late 1950s, these events were the last straw.

//The long and winding road//

It should have been a straightforward world tour, another chance to showcase to the world the greatest music act on the planet. The tour was to start in Germany, then on to Japan; after three days in Tokyo, the band would head to Manila. Rest in India and England would follow, before the group headed to North America for a two-week tour culminating in the concert at Candlestick Park on 29 August.

Yet almost immediately the Far Eastern leg of the tour started to look troublesome. July is one of the rainiest months of the year in Japan, and the tour promoter had to find an indoors venue that was large enough for the estimated demand of 150,000 tickets. The only venue that could support such requirements was the Nippon Budokhan, built for the 1964 Olympic games in Tokyo to house the judo competition.

More than just a marital art, judo is a sacred activity in Japan. Its practices and rituals are enmeshed in the tradition of Shintoism, the country's national religion. And that's not all: the Budokhan is situated at the heart of imperial and religious Tokyo, next to the

emperor's palace and the Shinto Yaukuni shrine. The ground on which the hall rests was the former site of the plaza where Japanese soldiers swore allegiance to the emperor before leaving to fight in the Second World War.

All of this meant that the decision to hire the venue for a Beatles concert created a major backlash. There was disquiet at such a sacred venue being used by lowly pop group; no less a figure than the Japanese prime minister, Eisaku Satō, expressed discomfort. He was joined by Hosokawa Ryugrn, a journalist for *Asahi Shimbun*; Matastaro Shoriki, founder of the influential *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper, and Tatsuji Nagashima, erstwhile promoter of the concerts. Four pillars of the Japanese establishment – or, as the *Japan Times* dubbed them, the 'drab four' – found themselves united by their opposition to the plan.

Such responses are, perhaps, unsurprising. In 1966 Japan was only 14 years removed from recovering its sovereignty through the 1951 Peace Treaty and the US-Japan Security Treaty, or Anpo. Politically, the country had effectively been a one-party state since 1955, with the Liberal Democratic Party unchallenged in power. And, during this period, Japan's population grew rapidly, from 89 million in 1955 to 98 million in 1965.

These rapid changes took place in the midst of seeming political and social continuity. Yet powerful forces on the left and right of the Japanese political spectrum had the potential to cause serious disruption. In 1960, the disorder caused by a radical leftist student group had managed to stop a planned visit of President Eisenhower to sign a revised version of the Anpo treaty. That same year, an ultra-nationalist assassinated the leader of the Japanese Socialist Party, Inejirō Asanuma.

Such powerful political and media interests, and the fraught political environment, seriously threatened the concerts. However, when it was pointed out to the Japanese government that The Beatles had recently been awarded MBEs, the 'drab four' acquiesced in deference to this royal seal of approval. The concerts had the go-ahead.

This did not stop the concerns. Extremists from the Greater Japanese Patriotic Party threatened to 'give the Beatles proper haircuts'; the Tokyo education authority banned students from attending the gigs, and police remained worried about the potential for disorder having heard all about the wild scenes of Beatlemania.

The draconian organization extended to the Beatles' schedule. Everything was timed to the second, from the time it took for the lift to descend to the ground floor of their hotel to the arrival and departure on stage.

Despite the concerns, the concerts passed off without incident. Fans' reception was polite; George Harrison would describe it as a bit too clinical. Yet the Beatles would be instrumental in inspiring a new generation of Japanese musicians. Japan itself would be further rehabilitated in the eyes of its former enemies: in 1967, that other global symbol of British pop culture, James Bond, would further the interest in all things Japanese.

Unlike in Japan, there was no anticipation of the trouble that would greet the Beatles in the Philippines. Yet "from the moment, we landed it was bad news," as Harrison would later recall. The band members were hustled off their plane by president Ferdinand Marcos' men and driven to a houseboat in Manila harbor. Their personal belongings, including four diplomatic bags that contained their marijuana, were dumped on the tarmac at the airport. Harrison feared they were about to be busted for possession: they managed to escape this jam, but that was only the start of their ordeal.

//In spite of all the danger//

As in Japan, the Philippines were in the midst of considerable change in 1966. It had gained its full independence in 1948, ending 50 years of a pseudo-colonial status with the United States. By the mid-60s, it was the second-fastest growing economy in South Asia. Yet considerable problems remained, notably poverty and the enormous sway that foreign companies exerted over the country's wealth and resources.

The political system was also notoriously corrupt, with the previous president emptying the national treasury to pay for his failed election campaign. Marcos had come to power pledging to modernise the nation and, at least initially, he and his wife Imelda were regarded favourably by the US and other western powers.

In the build-up to the Beatles' visit, Imelda had given their manager, Brian Epstein, an invitation for the group to attend a party at the presidential palace. From the early days of global fame, the Beatles had been wary of diplomatic events. This was the result of a major row at the British embassy in Washington in 1964 when a member of diplomatic staff had cut off some of Ringo Starr's hair with a pair of scissors. Epstein's naivety

about diplomacy was much in evidence in Manila: he sent a telegram refusing the offer. He did not realise that it was not an invitation, but in effect, a summons.

The Beatles found out about the diplomatic slight while, when watching TV in their hotel rooms, they saw the main Philippine broadcaster showing the Fab Four's non-appearance. After a number of hours showing empty tables and crying children, Imelda flounced off – declaring that, in any case, her children preferred the Rolling Stones.

Almost immediately, the group faced a backlash. Attempts to order room service were ignored; when they were served, they were given sour milk for their breakfast cereals. The scheduled gigs went ahead in front of an estimated 100,000 fans, but this only served to emphasise an odd aspect of the experience: on the one hand, it was classic Beatlemania, but on the other, a growing campaign of intimidation.

Events reached a peak as they tried to leave. No one came to collect them; no one helped them pack up their gear. Authorities even shut down airport escalators, forcing the band and their small entourage to carry their equipment up flights of stairs. In the departure lounge, Marcos' men arrived and began to push members of the band around. John Lennon and Ringo Starr tried to find protection behind some nuns, figuring that, because the Philippines was Catholic, they might be considered inappropriate targets.

Even when they got to the sanctuary of their flight, the ordeal was not over. Philippine government officials boarded and demanded the Beatles pay a 'departure tax' of \$17,000 – coincidentally, exactly how much they had earned from the gigs.

Although it was unlikely that the Beatles would have come to any real harm, the incident was an early indicator of the character of Marcos's conjugal dictatorship. In inadvertently snubbing the Marcos' offer, the band highlighted the regime's capricious, sensitive and violent nature. Even a modest slight was to be punished, as the people of the Philippines were to increasingly discover over the next 20 years.

//Devil in her heart//

In March 1966, the *Evening Standard* conducted interviews with each of the Beatles for a series to be published in newspaper's magazine. The interview with John Lennon was, in the main, a portrait of a bored, directionless artist. Yet it did contain one rather

profound statement: “Christianity will go, it will vanish and shrink. We’re more popular than Jesus now”. A few weeks after publication, Epstein wrote to the newspaper to thank it for the articles. At this point, there had not been a single word of protest about Lennon’s statement.

All of this changed when the US teen magazine *Datebook* reproduced the interview in early August 1966, just before the group was due to arrive in the country. Starting in Mississippi, then across the American South, opportunistic DJs, clergy and others began organising boycotts of Beatles music and of events for locals to burn “Beatle trash”.

Epstein initially considered postponing the parts of the tour in places such as Memphis and St Louis, but the band eventually agreed to aim for damage limitation. Epstein flew to New York to try and row back on what Lennon said and, when the Beatles arrived in the US in mid-August, two press conferences were arranged for *mea culpas* by Lennon.

Lennon said that he was “sorry for the mess that he had made” and that he was “not anti-God, anti-Christ or anti-religion”. He concluded that he had forgotten that he was a Beatle, and that his words would resonate in ways that other people’s would not. This appeased some critics, but there was still some hostility towards them and the group was constantly on edge – as the Memphis firecracker incident demonstrated.

Some elements of the Christian fundamentalist community had been gunning for the Beatles even before the ‘bigger than Jesus’ outburst. Perhaps most famous among these figures was David Noel Dean of the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist Youth University in Colorado, who had been warning of the dangers of the group since early 1965. Noel’s concern was that the Beatles’ mesmeric effect on the young of America could pave the way for “riot and revolt”. He extrapolated on this theory in his two anti-Beatles treatises, *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles* (1965) and *The Beatles: A Study in Drugs, Sex and Revolution* (1969).

It is possible to see the controversy a simply a manifestation of Bible-belt reactionary attitudes. Yet, as with Japan and the Philippines, it is also important to consider the larger context, and 1966 was a crucial moment in the developing relationship between faith and politics in the US. Since the end of the Reconstruction after the American Civil War, the American South had solidly supported the Democrats, and an important element of this was provided by the support of churches for white people. This

relationship started to fragment with the advent of the civil rights movement, and the growing influence of African Americans in the north of the country as they became more and more empowered.

This meant that, for the first time in a century, the American South was politically up for grabs. Republicans had started to make overtures in 1964, when its presidential candidate sought to make an electoral virtue out of his opposition to the Civil Rights Act. Republicans knew they could not make an overt appeal based on segregation or race, so instead chose to identify with southern churches over issues of modernity, sexuality and traditional patriotism.

At the same time in places such as California, conservative Republicans such as Ronald Reagan were helping to rebrand the party with an explicit appeal to Christian activists. The growing culture wars of the 1960s over gender, sexuality, drugs and Vietnam would empower Christian conservatives making their states, including many that took part in the Beatles boycotts enormously influential in shaping American politics.

As such, the three crises of the Beatles in 1966 were part of the dramatic story of the most important popular music group in history. Yet they also give insight into some of the most important global economic, political and social changes of an extraordinary period in global history.