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George Jackson: A Hero-Victim?

To the Editor:

On the Aug. 27 Op-Ed page Roger Wilkins wrote an eloquent eulogy of George Jackson, the black convict shot down in San Quentin's prison yard.

Mr. Wilkins did not write like the lawyer that he is—he contrasted the worlds of East Hampton and San Quentin with the skill of a novelist.

So it was altogether natural to be moved by his prose while not being impressed by his reasoning.

Having a summer home in the Hamptons, I can recognize the ludicrous solace of that area. For Mr. Wilkins, a black, it was perhaps an unfortunate setting in which to reflect upon the events that led to Jackson's death or, as Mr. Wilkins wrote from East Hampton, about "... that strain of American life that encourages people to fritter their lives away heedless of casual and calculated cruelties inflicted on people who do not belong. . . ."

But the guilt of affluence and the shame of racism which so many liberal whites (I include myself) bear with easy equanimity does not mean that we must accept Mr. Wilkins' implication that George Jackson is the latest hero-victim in our bloody and divided land.

The facts as known to date tell us that three guards and two convicts were killed before Jackson was shot down. If we knew the personal histories of these victims, we might perceive as great an injustice in their deaths as Mr. Wilkins sees in Jackson's death.

Too often we rationalize such deaths in order not to disturb our liberal theory of social and economic injustice that is threatened (or is it confirmed?) by the murder and mayhem committed by the less fortunate and, as the theory goes, therefore the less accountable.

Mr. Wilkins wrote, "If some men kill to prevent the theft of the goods of their store or their family jewels might others not also kill to prevent

the theft of their lives and their spirits?" Of course, he is explaining motive rather than defending it in such a passage but the implication is that it should be thoroughly persuasive in mitigation of Jackson's allegedly taking the lives of others before losing his.

I suppose I could make a similar kind of explanation for the righteousness of the soul that made killers out of Oswald, Sirhan, Ray and Calley. But it does not excuse their crimes.

It is tempting to exaggerate the meaning of homicides that explode in the angry chaos of our times. We make criminals into scapegoats or sometimes martyrs in order to hide from the terror that we are not in control of events. We choose sides and invent conspiracies — forgetting that no amount of social engineering will ever save us from ourselves.

Mr. Wilkins concluded that "the bullet that split [Jackson's] skull and creased his spine could not kill what he had become."

What had he become?

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