

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 23—To many Americans, white and black, it will seem unlikely that the San Quentin prison authorities "set up" the killing of George Jackson, one of the so-called Soledad Brothers, particularly since several guards also were killed. But many others, mostly black, perhaps, but not a few of them white, will not find it hard to agree with his mother.

"They killed him and set him out in the yard and photographed him, and then said he tried to escape," Mrs. Jackson told Wallace Turner of The New York Times. "They've been trying for ten and a half years, to do it and they did it."

Most of us never come into difficulties with policemen and never see the inside of a prison, even as visitors, and our tendency is to respect authority and to discount as hysterical and self-serving such views as Mrs. Jackson expressed. Authority in America is not supposed or generally thought to do such things.

But that is not necessarily the view in the black ghetto, where authority—mostly white—is deeply mistrusted. That is not the view of many in the black community everywhere who—just in the last year or so—have seen little or nothing done about the Orangeburg Massacre, the rioters shot in the back in Augusta, the students gunned down at Jackson State, Fred Hampton destroyed in his bed, and hundreds of less publicized crimes. That is not the view of those who have seen young sons and brothers go to prison for minor offenses and come out of these grim schools of crime and degeneracy—if they ever do—as hardened law-breakers and permanent outcasts from society.

Nor are blacks—or Chicanos or Indians or other minorities—the only people who look at authority in America with misgivings or mistrust. The dead and maimed students at Kent State were white, and nothing is to be done. Other whites in low economic and social status know what it means to be powerless and hopeless before an uncaring or oppressive law. And many whites who are neither powerless nor hopeless are nevertheless deeply concerned, and aware that all is not as promised in the promised land.

So if it may well be true that Mrs. Jackson was overwrought—why not, with two sons dead before the gunfire of white authority?—it is also true that, for once, this predominantly white society ought not passively to accept the opposite and usual assumption that authority is blameless and truthful, and those who defy it are

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fools or depraved, especially if black.

That is not just because George Jackson, the tragic and talented author of "The Prison Letters," sentenced at 19 for one year to life for confessing to a \$70 robbery, had become a symbol to so many blacks—particularly the young and passionate—of the rank injustice they believe with all too much reason their people have suffered at the hands of the police and the courts and the prisons. It is that symbolic position and the violence of his death at San Quentin that will cause so many in anger and in sorrow to agree with Mrs. Jackson that at last her defiant son was "set up."

If it can be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that there was no such "set up," of course that may be useful to society in trying to hold black disaffection and anger within bounds. Almost certainly, and for just that reason, there already are stirrings within the liberal power structure to press an investigation to the limit. So was there in the case of Fred Hampton, with little result.

A better reason for challenging official explanations and general assumptions in the San Quentin case is to get at the truth of George Jackson's life, not just the truth of his death. Whether or not he was shot while escaping or was in some way "set up" for killing, his life was the real tragedy. It is indisputably an American tragedy.

He was, that is, not merely a victim of racism, although he was certainly that. He was a victim, too, of the poverty and hunger and disadvantage that are not the lot of blacks alone in this richest country on earth. His schools treated him with contempt. He was shot at age 15 by its violent lawmen. Its courts knew nothing better to do with him than to send him to its harsh prisons, where he spent a third of his life. There, and in his brief years on the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles—by his own account—he learned that "the jungle is still the jungle, be it composed of trees or skyscrapers, and the law of the jungle is bite or be bitten."

A talented writer, a sensitive man, a potential leader and political thinker of great persuasiveness, George Jackson was destroyed long before he was killed at San Quentin. There are thousands upon thousands like him—black and white, brothers all—who will be or have been destroyed, too. Until this wanton destruction of humanity in America is seen for what it is, it will go on, and consume us all.

Death of a Brother

N.Y. Times
8/24/71
P. 37