

The Animals at Attica

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 15 — After the massacre at Attica, Governor Rockefeller issued a statement that began with this sentence:

"Our hearts go out to the families of the hostages who died at Attica."

Much of what went wrong at Attica — and of what is wrong at most other American prisons and "correction facilities" — can be found in the simple fact that neither in that sentence nor in any other did the Governor or any official extend a word of sympathy to the families of the dead prisoners.

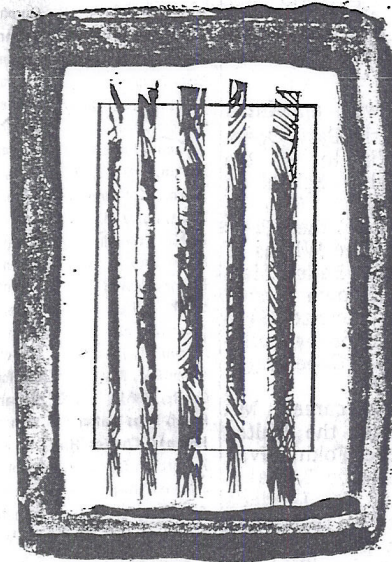
True, at that time, it was thought that the deaths of the hostages had been caused by the prisoners, rather than — as is now known — by the bullets and buckshot of those ordered by the state authorities to go over the walls shooting.

But even had the prisoners, instead of the police, been the killers of the hostages, they still would have been human beings; certainly their mothers and wives and children still would have been human beings. But the official heart of the State of New York and its officials did not go out to any of them.

That is the root of the matter; prisoners, particularly black prisoners, in all too many cases are neither considered nor treated as human beings. And since they are not, neither are their families. Yesterday, the families of sixteen Attica inmates, gathered outside the medical examiner's office in Rochester, could not find out whether their husbands and sons were dead or alive; since last Thursday night they had not even been able to find out whether the men were involved in the prison rebellion, because the state would not trouble to tell them.

Dead hostages, for another example, were sent to the morgue tagged with their names; dead prisoners went tagged "P-1," "P-2," and so on. That is an almost unbearable fact to those who heard an eloquent prisoner shouting in the yard of D-Block last Friday night: "We no longer wish to be treated as statistics, as numbers. We want to be treated as human beings, we will be treated as human beings!" But even in death, they were still just numbers.

Time and again, members of the special observers' group that tried to negotiate a settlement at Attica heard the prisoners plead that they, too, were human beings and wanted above all to be treated as such. Once, in a negotiating session through a steel-barred gate that divided prisoner-held and state-held territory, Assistant Correction Commissioner Walter Dunbar told the prisoner leader, Richard Clark,

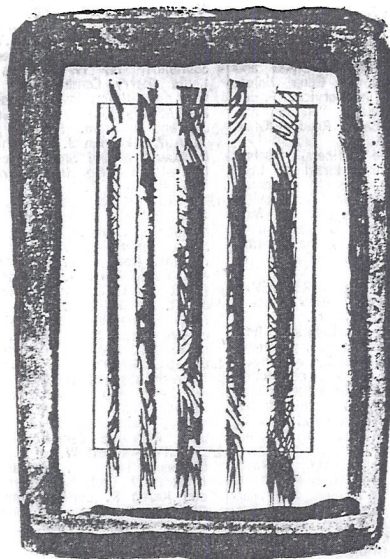


"In thirty years, I've never lied to an inmate."

"But how about to a man?" Clark said quietly.

The physical aspect of a place like Attica — the grim walls, the bare yards, the clanging steel — bespeaks the attitude that prisoners are wild animals to be caged. Entering a tier in Cellblock C, where prisoners were under control, the observers were struck by the pathetic sight of shaving mirrors popping instantly from the window of each steel door; the windows are too small for the cells' occupants to see anywhere but straight ahead, and only the mirrors can show the prisoners what is happening in their "home."

Attica — like most prisons — is not a "correctional facility" at all; the phrase is a gruesome euphemism. No



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"correctional officer" there has any real training in correcting or teaching or counseling men; rather, they are armed guards set to herd animals. Senselessly, every guard at Attica is white, save one reported Puerto Rican no observer ever saw; but the prisoners are 75 per cent, or maybe 85 per cent — no one seems to know for sure — black and Puerto Rican. There is no Spanish-speaking doctor. All work for 30 cents a day, and one of their grievances claimed that they often were bilked of that.

The emphasis on guns and clubs during the crisis was incredible; it had to be seen to be believed. Once, standing alone and unarmed at the steel gate, Richard Clark refused to negotiate any further because the room beyond was packed with so many men bearing clubs, rifles, pistols, shot guns and tear-gas launchers. Three or four blocks from the prison, tourists were stopped at roadblocks by as many as four uniformed men, each carrying a club, a pistol, a rifle. So much weaponry was bound to be used sooner or later, and indiscriminately. And it was.

These guns, moreover, were in the hands of men who left no doubt they wanted to use them. Correction Commissioner Oswald's long delay of the assault and his efforts to negotiate were met with impatience and anger by the prison staff; the observers who were trying to prevent bloodshed saw hostility at every turn. A guard bringing them a box of food said as he put it down, "If I'd known it was for you people, I wouldn't have brought it."

The observers, after all, were standing between the men with the guns and the prisoners, who had none. Even the strong belief that an assault on the stronghold in Block D would cause the prisoners to kill their 38 hostages seemed to make little difference to those who had the guns; they wanted to go in.

The observers knew that. They said so to Commissioner Oswald and Governor Rockefeller, forcefully and in every way they could. They predicted a massacre. They said that waiting, while it might not ultimately prevent the slaughter, could hardly cause it; while attacking could result in nothing else.

But time is for men, not for prisoners and animals. Now the dead lie tagged in the morgue, and the men with the guns are counting their kill. They may even be looking forward to the same highly practical form of amnesty American society has already granted to the killers at Kent State and Orangeburg and Jackson State.