

# Disbelief and Rage in Attica

THE CONFUSION OF CONTRADICTION accounts from Attica state prison has proved maddening and unforgivable to some of the more tense members of that little upstate New York town which largely makes its way by tending and guarding the institution.

The townspeople of Attica are reported to be making the State Commissioner of Corrections, Russell G. Oswald, the target of their fears, grief and shame over the worst episode of riot, rebellion and massacre that has ever occurred in an American prison.

"I don't want to work there so long as this state is run by the Oswalds, the Dunbars and the niggers," said one prison employee, and he evidently speaks the sentiment of the townsfolk, most of whom, it is reported, lay the causes of the rebellion to Oswald's reformist policies and prefer to believe that their friends and loved ones, nine of the ten dead hostages, were killed by cutthroat prisoners, not by the gunfire of their intended liberators, the state police.

IF THE RANTING SLOGANS and revolutionary pronouncements of the rebel leaders who held sway inside the walls of this almost indescribably grim and dreary place have seemed paranoid to those of us on the outside, these disbeliefs of the Atticans must also appear something less than balanced and equable.

The truth is that both sides were caught up in a madness, an emotional torment that strained their capacity to see things clearly, remember events accurately and weigh dreadful alternatives always rationally.

Commissioner Oswald's astonishing statement yesterday in which he acknowledged and feebly attempted to explain how it came about that the world first was told that the hostages died as a result of having their throats cut, when the cause of death in each instance was gunshot wounds that could only have come from the law enforcers, shows how far from reality things can stray. As a consequence, this man, who is apparently a good and sensible career penologist, sadly compromises his authority and influence over changes in the New York penal system which everyone concedes are overdue.

WHAT IS TO BE SAID about the amazing unity of the rebels? This was testified to by columnist Tom Wicker of the New York Times, who was in and out of the prison over several days as a citizen observer and whose closeups of the rebel mind are to be trusted. It may have been only a momentary unity, but still it must be conceded to be an extraordinary force that desperate "losers" like the Attica leaders exercised over their fellows. They succeeded in welding together a most unbrotherly group of men into a brotherhood. These men have been furnished with an image of themselves as political victims of a racist society that cares nothing for them — and little good will it do to try to tell them they are the victims of themselves and their own felonies.

Revolutionary doctrines and militant myths are transmitted to our prisons from the outside and they are generated inside by natural leaders and ideologues. No prison door can keep them out. From the recent testimony of Attica and San Quentin, it is clear that they are producing the most intractable attitudes prison officials have to deal with.