

The 'Root Causes' of Attica

By SPIRO T. AGNEW

WASHINGTON—When even a liberal with the doughty credentials of David Susskind is impelled to react against what he called "rancid liberal rhetoric," it is obvious that the polemics of the doctrine of societal guilt have gone too far. Yet, that is exactly what has occurred in the aftermath of the riot and ensuing bloodshed at Attica state prison.

What happened at Attica could not have been foreseen, unless one is willing to accept the radical ideological premise of original sin which holds every outbreak of violence in our society to be further evidence of the intrinsic evil of the System. However, what has happened since—the litany of recrimination against "the authorities," the naive equating of antisocial with social goals, the call for examination of "root causes"—all of this could have been foreheard in the rhetorical excesses which followed previous confrontations between society's authority and antisocial force.

Very well, then, let us examine some of the "root causes" of Attica—though not in the sense of attributing indiscriminate blame to American institutions. This is not to say that all is perfect within our system, or that penological theory and practice in the United States is beyond criticism. We all know that improvement is needed. But perspective constitutes the first requisite of wisdom. Little credit is due otherwise responsible public spokesmen whose desire to placate a far Left constituency has caused them to overlook the fact that, for all its shortcomings, the theory of American criminology and our penal system remain among the most humane and advanced in the world. Thus, to assert that the question raised at Attica was "Why men would rather die than live another day in America" is the purist political fatuity.

To position the "demands" of convicted felons in a place of equal dignity with legitimate aspirations of law-abiding American citizens—or to compare the loss of life by those who violate the society's law with a loss of life of those whose job it is to uphold it—represents not simply an assault on human sensibility, but an insult to reason. Worst of all, it gives status and seeming respectability to the extremists in our society whose purpose it is to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the problems of race relations—the very problems to which the spokesmen, in this instance, allude.

In my opinion, then, it is the approbation given extremists by some responsible leaders of both races that has nurtured the roots of violence

such as occurred at Attica and, not long before, at San Quentin.

To be sure, when law-abiding citizens of both the white and black races are daily subjected to the editorial elevation of convicted felons into "revolutionary leaders," the effect of such near apotheosis is to blur lines of rational, democratic discussion, not simply of penological but of all the broad social problems which concern our society. As for the effect of such exultation of criminality on lawbreakers both within and outside prison walls, who can doubt that violence is encouraged when the violent-prone are provided a civilized rationale for their psychopathic proclivities?

"Let's not try to compromise the demands," said the Black Panther leader sent to Attica to help "negotiate" a settlement. The roots of such reckless intransigence, which contributed to the need to use force to break the strike, do not lie in "social injustice" or "revolutionary" fervor. Rather, what we heard there was the voice of criminal arrogance fed by the long time accommodation of moderate spokesmen, white and black alike, to the extremism of word and deed practiced by black power militants.

Again, when a Panther leader vows to "chop off the head" of a United States Senator, and another threatens to "slit every throat that threatens our freedom," the seeds of violence are sown and flourish. The situation is not helped by the words of a heretofore responsible Negro leader who said that, although he "may not agree all down the line" with the Panthers, he is "on the same side" because "they complain of things the average Negro knows are true"; or by the Atlanta-based black leader who, though committed to the doctrine of nonviolence, lost no time in gratuitously endorsing the Panthers when they recently announced an intention to move their headquarters to that community.

What happened at Attica proves once again that when the responsible voices of society remain mute, the forces of violence and crime grow arrogant. One need only recall the era of Hitler's Storm Troopers to realize what can happen to the most civilized of societies when such a cloak of respectability is provided thugs and criminals.

In taking the necessary steps to end the confrontation at Attica, Governor Rockefeller acted courageously. Those who would have had him act otherwise have yet to learn the paramount lesson of our century; that acquiescence to the demands of the criminal element of any society only begets greater violence.

For reaction to this article, see the following (filed Attica, unless otherwise noted):

Joseph Rhodes Jr.
NYTimes 22 Sep 71

Norman Cousins
Saturday Review 16 Oct 71

Jimmy Breslin
NYTimes 9 Oct 71