

The Unnecessary Deaths

By KENNETH A. GIBSON

NEWARK, N. J. — The bloodshed that occurred in Attica, N. Y., disturbs me more deeply than any event in recent memory.

The use of coordinated organized violence in overcoming the inmates at Attica state prison stands as one of the most callous and blatantly repressive acts ever carried out by a supposedly civilized society on its own people. All of us who oppose violence must deplore this use of force by so-called responsible authorities. Further, we must attempt to understand this event fully.

The demands of the inmates at Attica were basically reasonable and human. They asked for more relevant vocational shops, true religious freedom, a chance to work at renovating the facilities, and other things which we recognize as necessary for a man to function as an alert, healthy being. The fact that they had to take over the prison only suggests the extent of their frustration and the lack of other channels to express totally legitimate grievances.

We understand why these demands had to be made.

But we must understand more than this. We must recognize the political awareness present in the inmates' actions. And we must see in this awareness an awakened desire of people actively and constructively to change and improve their condition.

Across the country young men and women in prisons are becoming aware

of the forces which have controlled their lives. Many of these people have previously been uninvolved, alienated, without direction. They now attempt to learn how to deal with these forces and institutions so that they might be able to shape their own destiny and that of their children.

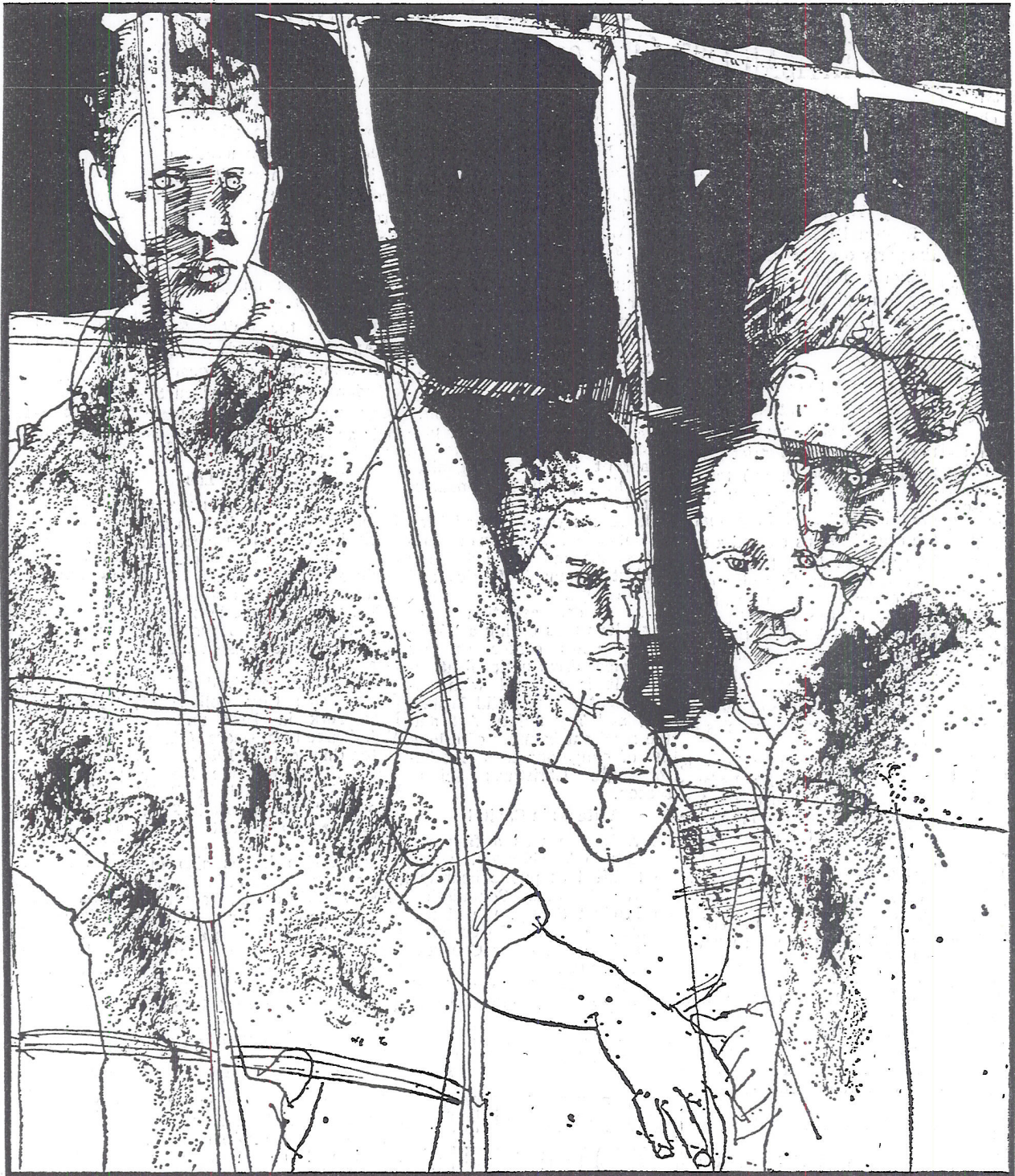
We applaud this as a vital and human development, recognizing that it is good for people to become involved in the process of changing their lot.

And we say that if this practice involves challenges to existing institutions then those institutions must be open to the challenge for it is made out of genuine legitimate concerns. Yet, we must recognize that those in positions of power who feel threatened by this political awareness react in a most violent and repressive manner. We condemn this repression, because awareness and involvement of people in controlling their own future is something to be encouraged.

And there is still more to understand. When we look at pictures from Attica or the Tombs or San Quentin, we see black and Spanish faces. In some prisons inmate population is 80 per cent or more black and Spanish. Those people who have been victimized by the society on the streets are now victimized in prison. When we look at prison conditions and the brutal use of force at Attica we see the same force of racism which caused and then put down with force civil disturbances in this country's ghettos. This racism cannot be tolerated.

The inmates of Attica were victims of a systematic violence which pervades not only our prisons but the streets and towns of this society. We must admit as a nation that the deaths at Attica should never have occurred and we must act to erase the possibility of their recurrence.

Mayor Kenneth A. Gibson of Newark wrote this statement on Monday, Sept. 13, immediately after hearing of the Attica catastrophe.



Alan E. Cober