

The 'Dirty 30' and Attica

By JIM INGRAM

DETROIT—As the only black newsman requested to go behind the walls of Attica prison as a member of a citizens' observing committee, I found myself more at home inside the yard in the inmate-controlled D block than either of my two white colleagues.

After all, I am black. I know what being in a jail cell at the mercy of white jailers feels like, and I have been beaten by white policemen. And although white reporters have been beaten by white policemen they have never been beaten because of their color. So I sensed an oppressive atmosphere when I entered Attica. It dropped over me like a thick blanket. I felt the "hate stare" of the all-white guards.

Moving on into D block I saw that the prisoners, as in most American prisons, were mostly black.

But racism alone is not all that is wrong with prisons in or near towns like Attica. How about the attitude that violence can actually solve social problems?

How else to explain what motivated a woman in a restaurant not far from Attica to refuse service to a newspaperman, a state senator and a state assemblyman, telling them "I hope they kill all of you!"

A prison guard told a reporter at Attica, "Those men [the prisoners] are sexual perverts." Is it not perverted to deny a man or woman the opportunity to realize their basic urges?

The reporters for one paper in Attica accepted virtually everything prison officials said as fact (now they are doubting). Anything imputed to the inmates by prison officials was usually reported as having actually occurred. "The inmates killed . . ." or, "the rioters wounded . . ." was common, rather than the traditional, attributory reporting method: "according to prison officials," "prison authorities charge," etc.

There was a general distrust of prison officials among the inmates and this was the reason they gave for not emerging from the D block area and meeting on neutral ground as Commissioner of Correction Russell Oswald demanded late Sunday when our committee began to realize time was running out and there was likely to be a blood bath.

"They will kill us out there. Believe me, we know what we are talking about," the inmates said.

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There were those among us who seemed to be using this balance of human lives as an opportunity to make political hay, grab headlines or promote a particular organization. At times we came close to blows—some of us because of the understandable tension brought about by lack of sleep, collective sense of elapsing time, and the overwhelming comprehension of the magnitude of our personal involvement.

We were in disagreement about things, we railed at each other and we argued and argued, but we all were in agreement about one thing: those men inside D block—hostages and inmates—did not have to die. They deserved to live and, it grew increasingly evident to us, that time was really running out.

We in that group did some real down-to-earth soul-searching. We wept, most of us. We restated our convictions and beliefs. At that time some of us changed them. We came together. We still engaged in debate

but we finally were united in what we said and did.

We had felt somewhat ashamed of ourselves prior to that.

The entire story of Attica must be told and an important part of that story was the role that our bedraggled, demoralized and tense group was forced to play. We had some good minds, some strong people, some real men and we vowed that we would not

dissolve as a group after we left that room. We said we would continue to wage war against that "thing" which creates conditions where men kill men.

Maybe that's why some of the townspeople of Attica called us the "dirty thirty."

Jim Ingram, of The Michigan Chronicle, was on the negotiating team of "outsiders" at Attica.