

NEWSBRIEFS

MASSACRE AT ATTICA

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(A new feature by the noted
KDAY radio news journalist)

When the prisoners of Attica staged their revolt, they permitted a number of outsiders to enter their stronghold, to witness their conditions and those of the hostages. One of the observers was Tom Wicker, associate editor of the *New York Times*.

In a column for the *Times*, Wicker has labeled the action of the state troopers at Attica, "a massacre." And he offers a special insight into what occurred. And a special damnation of the authorities.

Wicker recalls the day when he heard a prisoner shouting in the yard of D Block: "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, the prisoners were still statistics and numbers. In the riot's aftermath, the dead hostages went tagged "P-1," "P-2," and so on. For nearly a week, the families of the Attica inmates were not able to learn from corrections officials whether their husbands and sons, were dead or alive. And not a word of sympathy was expressed by any New York official to the families of the dead inmates. Writes Wicker: "That is the root of the matter; prisoners, particularly black prisoners, are neither considered nor treated as human beings. And since they are not, neither are their families."

Wickers' charge might well apply to this country's attitude toward prisoners. Are we really interested in "correcting" the men in our penal institutions, or are we interested only in revenge?

Those who know nothing about the animal existence of most prisoners in

our "correctional institutions" dumbly proclaim that they are being coddled. And if they have any complaint at all about the action at Attica, it is only that the authorities waited too long to kill the prisoners.

The *New York Times*' Wicker was one of those who pleaded for more time — but his efforts — and those of the other observers — were met with anger and impatience by the prison staff. Comments Wicker: "The observers after all were standing between the men with the guns and the prisoners, who had none." To the end, the *Times*' editor and the observers continued to plead for time, advising prison officials that while waiting might not ultimately prevent a slaughter, attacking could result in nothing else.

Wicker concludes with these words: "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."

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What will be the end result of Attica? Better conditions in our prisons? An emphasis on rehabilitation rather than vengeance? Reform? What?

The statements being made by virtually every corrections official in the country indicate that what will occur will be a tough clamp-down on political militants behind prison walls.

Vice-President Agnew, in examining what he calls "The root

causes of Attica" charges that revolutionaries, accommodated by moderates, inspired the prisoners at Attica to revolt.

The guards at Attica echo the sentiment. In the words of one of them: "That riot happened because those black militants wanted to take over the damn place and run it on their own terms."

A hint of what might occur comes in the opinions expressed by the Reverend James Collins, a Roman Catholic priest assigned as prison chaplain to the New York State Correctional Facility at Elmira. Father Collins proposes the creation of a separate maximum security institution — "as strong as Alcatraz" — to hold those he calls "hard-core, militant, Marxist revolutionaries."

"Until this is done," says Father Collins, "you're going to have more than what you had at Attica."

The priest says he sees significance in the fact that prisoners at Attica desecrated the prison chapel (the new revolutionary prisoner; the old prisoners, no matter how intransigent, would not have wrecked the chapel). Says the priest: "You've got a new ballgame in prisons now — a new breed of revolutionary who wants to bring down the prisons. They're just as dedicated to that as most of us are to the rule of law."

The priest adds: "A small group of such men can tear an institution up. The ordinary prisoner has no choice but to go along."

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New York state troopers were packing up and leaving the motel and hotel rooms of Attica. And as they left they were being congratulated all around. For newsmen, the troopers had some observations of their own to make about the report by the local coroner that the hostages died of gunshot wounds — not knife slashings. "I don't believe the Medical-Examiner's report," said one of the troopers. Another claimed that the report was "fixed." And still another commented: "Everyone blames the police nowadays."

Another trooper told how he saw one of his fellows shot during the raid, "but he didn't mind," the

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trooper added, "because he had a nigger on the top of him."

Most of the congratulations for the troopers were coming from the guards at Attica, all of whom are white. One of the guards commented that it is useless to negotiate with inmates. He added: "When dealing with these barbarians, they're not about to cooperate. I know, I've tried to rehabilitate them."

It might be noted, however, that not a single guard — they're called correctional officers — had ever been trained in correcting, rehabilitating, teaching, or counseling prisoners.

Another guard, one who had been taken hostage, said of the invasion of troopers: "If I got shot, I got shot. I was only hoping the bullet would go through me and get (a prisoner)."

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A 28-year-old gas station jock sat at an Attica bar, talking to a reporter: "These guys at the bar, they're blue-collared guys who work around here; they're always talking about how people are coddling prisoners and they want to see them treated tougher. Me, I'm for reforms, but if I ever opened my mouth about it, I guess they'd ram my teeth down my throat."

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Three years ago Elliot Barkley was convicted of forging and cashing a money-order for \$124.50. Testimony in court, however, depicted the 18-year-old as a bright lad, who had excelled in basketball, had engaged in handicrafts, was concerned with social issues. Neighbors said he came from a fine family. He was one of ten children.

And so Elliot Barkley was paroled.

But some time later he was arrested again — this time for driving without a license. The judge ruled that Elliot had violated his parole and sent him to prison — and nobody heard much from him again until two weeks ago ... when there was Elliot ... on television ... identified as a leader of the prisoner-rebels who had taken over Block D in Attica. Elliot was using the pseudonym, L.D. He spoke of the need for prison reforms ... and he listed the prisoner demands.

They buried Elliot Barkley in Rochester last Monday. He had been killed when New York state troopers moved into Attica last week. And at the funeral services, one thousand people pushed into the church, and spilled into the streets outside as a procession of ministers paid tribute to L.D.

Canon St. Julian Simpkins eulogized: "Just as the apostles and prophets were martyrs for a cause, this young man gave his life as a martyr to end man's inhumanity to man."

Another minister, the Reverend Marvin Chandler, who had served as one of the observers during the siege of Attica, told the congregation that Elliot and the other prisoners involved in the revolt "sought to change what was for them an unbearable human condition." And the minister put his finger on the point of what is wrong with our prison system when he said: "Punishment must be used as redemption, not as revenge."

When he finished speaking, the clergyman's voice shifted to song, an old slave song called "Oh, Freedom." The congregation began joining in, a few at first, then a swelling chorus, all one thousand of them singing the lines: "And before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave. And go home with my Lord and be free."