

# Saturday Review



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## Attica and Mr. Agnew

Vice President Spiro Agnew is appalled and indignant because some editorial writers have expressed as much shock and revulsion over the killing of prisoners as over the killing of guards in the Attica prison massacre. Mr. Agnew says he cannot understand why some people fail to make a distinction between the worth of a guard and the worth of a prisoner.

"To compare," he says, "the loss of life by those who violate society's law with the loss of life by those whose job it is to uphold it represents not simply an assault on human sensibility but an insult to reason."

We accept Mr. Agnew's call to reason. He is the second highest official of the United States government. At any moment he could become the highest. It is reasonable to expect, whether he is Number One or Number Two, that he should understand and uphold the underlying ideas and principles of the government he serves. No idea or principle is more basic to that government than that the value of a man's life transcends his pedigree or pigmentation or politics or personality or property. Nor is any notion more alien in such a society than that some men have the right to kick other men around because their power to do so is sanctioned by qualitative standards.

Mr. Agnew evokes the specter of Adolf Hitler to make the point that whole societies can become uncivilized when "a cloak of respectability is provided thugs and criminals." The Vice President was right in pointing to Hitler, but he has missed the essential message. The relevant point about Hitler is that Nazism was tied to the idea

that the lives of some men are worth less than those of other men, and that the head of a state not only has the right to make such distinctions but has the instant authority to decide who shall live or die. The Nazis acted like thugs and criminals not because they enjoyed "a cloak of respectability"—they didn't give a damn for respectability—but because they had the mentality of thugs and criminals. And nothing was more singular or dangerous in that mentality than its full-blown assumptions of superiority.

If Mr. Agnew is looking for historical analogies to juxtapose against Hitlerism, he could do no better than to read the text of the debates that took place in Philadelphia between 1787 and 1789. It is doubtful whether the nature of human values and the political requirements for sustaining them were ever more thoroughly discussed or understood by any constituted body of men. These men would have no hesitation in declaring that the fact that a man has become a prisoner does not mean that he has ceased to be a human being. Nor does it mean, they would hold, that how he is treated is no longer the concern of free men, or that considerations of justice or compassion no longer apply.

One reason the Founding Fathers were not contemptuous of prisoners was that America was settled by so many of them. Even people in high station today tend to forget there was a time when America was the Siberia of Great Britain, being used as the dumping ground for all sorts of undesirables, defectives, and chronic law-breakers. In the environment of a new world,

these human discards were able to experience the reality of regeneration. Their children were free of legislated stigma; they grew up as free citizens who were energized by the attainability of their hopes. In later years, they were joined by millions of other harried and longing people, all the way from Norway to Greece, many of whom fled from the concept that their lives were not as important as those of some of their fellow countrymen. If a law were passed today requiring that an identifying armband be worn by every American whose immigrant ancestors felt unwanted and unequal in their homelands, a large number of distinguished arms would be included in the company, not excepting men in the highest posts in government.

Yes, Mr. Agnew, the life of a prisoner is just as precious in American traditions as the life of a guard or an editorial writer or a Vice President of the United States. The fact that an iron gate closes behind a man doesn't relieve the rest of us of all feelings of decency or concern. What about the relatives of prisoners? Can Mr. Agnew accept the fact that these families may experience love and devotion for a man in jail? Or that they will continue to hope for his rehabilitation, as well as for his decent treatment? Do they have any claim on the sympathy and reasonable attention of society? Or are they, too, to be regarded as of lesser worth than the families of law-abiding and law-enforcing citizens?

Mr. Agnew believes prisoners should not be coddled. Again, he is addressing himself to the wrong question. The question is not whether prisoners should be coddled but whether the American people have ever thought through the purposes and practices of criminal punishment. Is the purpose of a prison to rehabilitate a man or to lock him into a penal outlook so that he will never free himself from a life of crime? Can society reduce crime by herding men together in an atmosphere saturated with crime? Can we reduce crime by refusing in many cases to reincorporate ex-convicts into the productive life of the country, pushing them back into a life of crime for which they have been well-schooled while in jail?

The message of Attica is that we have turned our backs on a whole array of grave national problems—all the way from what happens when a young man is jailed for selling dope to a breakdown situation in a state prison when men with guns are ordered to fire upon rioters. There is no reason in riots, or in the use of guns to quell them, or in irresponsible disregard of the causes, or in unfeeling pronouncements by public officials. The bullets of Attica are still flying.

—N.C.