

By DAVID ROTHENBERG

Last week, I was continually asked how Rahway State Prison in New Jersey compared with Attica. Since I have been meeting with inmates in Rahway for over three years as a friend and teacher and was a member of the Attica Observers' Committee, it seemed that a comparison must be offered.

And yet, comparisons are meaningless for the worst prison is the one you're in.

Some press reports quickly branded Rahway "a country club" and "a hotel." While being denied admission to the prison, some reporters were accepting misleading labels which reduced a complicated situation to one-syllable, glib journalism.

Conceptually prisons are all the same and therefore do not work. A man cannot be punished and rehabilitated simultaneously. The American prison system is a waste of the taxpayer's dollar and is the greatest single cause of crime in America today.

Our prisons take men and women who have committed a crime and mold them into criminals. A distinction must be made. A man who commits a crime does not necessarily have

crime as his life-style. All sorts of personal, economic or community pressures might have provoked the initial act or acts against society. It is the prison which makes criminal behavior, manipulation and machinations against society part of the man's permanent makeup. I know several men who were in jail for years, only to be found innocent of the crime which sent them away. But upon their release, they were more inmate than straight. The prison environment had done its work.

Prison, however, is the only business which can succeed by its own failures. It needs men returning to its fold so it can perpetuate itself. Whether the prison can change a man's life-style in a positive manner is not the prison's concern. It must maintain security and preserve itself. New prisons, such as Leesburg, are merely pastel fascism and have no relationship to changing a man's life-style. The fabled Robert Kennedy Youth Center in Morgantown, W. Va., is a prime example of how we spend dollars to pretend we are solving problems through architecture and ignore humanity in the process.

Let's stop deluding ourselves. If a man commits a crime, you cannot

lock him up and think he'll function better when you open the door again, three, five or ten years later. He must understand himself and his relationship to the community. What pressures caused him to commit the crime? Under similar circumstances, would he be likely to do the same thing? If he becomes familiar with society's inequities and obscenities, can he be justified in taking dope, or stealing, or placing himself in the position of going back into prison? Can he cope with his own needs and dreams?

To satisfactorily come to terms with these questions, an environment must be created to permit them to be dealt with. We cannot be boxed into a single punishment concept for all men—for all men are not equal, though all men must have equal opportunities.

Our need for vengeance is sometimes greater than our need for solving problems. Those familiar with the prison scene predicted after Attica that there would be others. Rahway is just another in the parade of inevitability.

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