

Blood on the Bars

A Time to Die

by Tom Wicker
Quadrangle, 342 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Howard Zinn

Ours is a time of place names that need no explanation. To sound them is to stop the heart a fraction of a second. Auschwitz. Hiroshima. My Lai. Kent State. Attica.

Attica. An eerie camp of war inside a stone wall 30 feet high, with prisoners as guards and guards as prisoners, and then the guns roaring, the chaos of slaughter, a moving circle of survivors stripped naked, disappearing behind enormous steel doors that clang shut, reverberating to infinity, behind which we faintly hear the methodical fall of clubs on flesh and then a silence, signaling the restoration of law and order.

Tom Wicker's book on Attica is a tense narrative—told in the third person—about that week in September 1971, a week that was brought to a climax when the governor of New York, now our Vice-President, spoke the words that

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turned D-yard into a slime of blood. But the book is more. It is the tough self-examination of a noted columnist, whose profession nervously stands watch over the passivity of its members but whose own sensibilities demanded—almost before he could think about it—that he cross into the forbidden zone of commitment. The mood is fascination, growing ashamed of itself, turning to anger.

As Wicker left Washington for Attica, his name on a small list the prisoners had requested as observers, he made a simple pledge to himself: *Nobody gets killed*. It came from deep down, perhaps from his plain, morally scrupulous family in Hamlet, N.C.; it was a simple idea that somehow stayed alive even inside the sophisticated journalistic world Wicker inhabited in Washington, D.C. When that pledge was shattered by the guns of the troopers at Attica, a back-home naiveté, which had held its breath an unreasonably long time inside Wicker, collapsed.

You learn about Wicker's life, his thoughts, through intriguing fragments of autobiography—he is an incorrigible novelist, unrehabilitated by all his time in press clubs. You also learn, in compact digressions, about the prison system in America—enough to persuade you, if

you need persuasion, that prisons should not be reformed and prettied up but should be dismantled, brick by brick, leaving to our grandchildren no physical reminder of our barbarity. Wicker skillfully sketches the evidence that prisons do not help fight crime and that they probably make things worse—thus removing any justification for a system of unspeakable cruelty.

He might also have said (we always want the author to consult *us* before writing his book) that the huge proportion of poor people in jail for crimes against property suggests that prisons are inevitable counterparts of banks. And that so long as we have a system that breeds fierce and unequal competition for scarce resources (although it is not the only system that requires imprisonment), some steel bars will be needed to protect money and others to confine human beings.

But the book is mostly about those six days at Attica, when Wicker and his fellow observers filed back and forth between a sullen, impatient army outside and the fragile friendship of the besieged inside. Wicker's honesty is as impressive as his prose. He gives a quick portrait of a white inmate who admits the observers to D-yard:

The man did not look directly at him, but in the weak, yellow light, like that in a medieval painting, there was something—so it seemed to Wicker in his nervousness—hard and desperate about the white face, the tattooed arm, the rigid intensity with which the man's body seemed to be charged, as if he were about to spring from the darkness and strike right through the mask of affluence and ease and order that shielded the faces of men like Tom Wicker from the hardest weathers of human existence.

The inmates created their own community inside the yard—hardly ideal, inescapably violent, unexpectedly humane, but considering the circumstances, an astonishing testament to the human potential for self-rule and far superior, ethically, both to the slave world they had just sundered and to the free world outside the walls, now getting ready to kill them. Wicker sketches the leaders and orators, almost all black: Herbert X. Blyden, eloquent, angry; Roger Champen, almost seven feet tall, cool; L. D. Barkley, bespectacled, precise, uncompromising (he was 21, in Attica for driving without a license, and had but a few days to live). He finds solidarity between black and white unbroken, from the seizure of the yard to the reoccupation.

There is diversity in the bureaucracy:



"I'll tell you what I want. I want self-actualization as a woman in a societal modality in which a viable life-style is divorced from pre-conceived ideas of sexual role-conditioning, and I want it now!"

the ruthless conservative, Warden Mancusi (the inmates, he said, were destroying "their home"); the rueful liberal, Commissioner Oswald; and the whole spectrum from itchy-fingered guards to manicured gubernatorial assistants. In the end, all differences in personal morality were ground into homogeneity by the work ethic and its chief rule: Obey the boss. The boss was Nelson Rockefeller, whose powers so transcended liberalism and conservatism that it would take a stronger stance than the mild reformism of an Oswald to resist the deadly suction that drew the cold and the compassionate alike into the vortex of the murderous. Rebellion was unthinkable inside the bureaucracy.

And in the end, even the observers—good men all, intelligent, brave—could only weep with despair and anger, sealed off in the Stewards' Room of the prison while the massacre proceeded a few hundred yards away. They had been more than observers: Wicker, Arthur Eve, Herman Badillo, William Kunstler, Lewis Steel, Clarence Jones, Jaybarr Kenyatta, and the rest. They had tried to mediate, tried to stall for time. They had, in the end, developed an agonized comradeship with the insurrectionists.

But the observers' powerlessness was ensured by adherence (though some of them knew better) to the "rationality" that is crucial to our higher learning. Only an "irrational" act (perhaps refusing to move from D-yard, thus forcing the authorities to reckon with killing not just obscure guards and worthless prisoners but journalists and legislators as well) had even a chance of preventing or delaying the attack. The observers were not lacking in courage, but, as Wicker writes, "Wicker . . . was a middle-class product of a system he regarded as fundamentally rational. He took it for granted that no one wanted the irrationality of bloodshed and death." And while not all the observers believed this—certainly not Kunstler and Steel, not Herman Badillo, and probably no black observer—as a group they were trapped inside the Stewards' Room of our Machiavellian culture, where we are all taught to stay within the rules of rationality and civility, by those who break the rules at will.

That the powerless can expect rational compromise from the powerful, that rulers and ruled share common values in the modern liberal state, is a seductive idea, mangled by history but kept alive by incessant transfusions. At Ludlow, Colo., in 1914, strike-leader Lou Tikas

went up the hill with a white flag to negotiate with the National Guard, which was being paid by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to crush a miners' strike in his coalfields. Tikas was executed on the spot, and then the tent colony where the strikers' families lived was attacked. That was the Ludlow Massacre, John D.'s legacy to his sons.

At Attica, Herman Badillo said, "There's always time to die. I don't know what the rush was." It was a momentary forgetting of the madness of those who ask for rationality.

The negotiations had broken down over the issue of amnesty, where—with the inequality in weaponry—no compromise was possible. To give amnesty would be to violate the Rockefeller Principle—the principle of Establishments everywhere: *Don't let them think rebellion works.*

And so the attack was ordered. Then came the official lies about the killing of the hostages, repeated in the press (" . . . convicts slashed their throats with knives," *The New York Times* said). The politicians were not anxious to have the remaining guards think—indeed, to have all of us remaining guards begin to think—that when the government is uptight, we are all as expendable as the prisoners.

Tom Wicker began to see that and more. *A Time to Die* is a meteor, following the unfinished trajectory of his thought, while illuminating D-yard in Attica, September 1971. With the Attica survivors now on trial in Buffalo, facing multiple life sentences (no amnesty, no pardons, no deals; they never held public office), Wicker's book is also a friend's powerful, passionate response to a call for help. □



"The rebellion is growing, Your Majesty. You are now master of all you survey except for the northern frontier, the river basin, and half of the valley."