

Surface and Core

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8—Following the bloody outburst of violence at San Quentin prison last month, I wrote in this space that many persons probably would not believe the official explanation of George Jackson's death, but would assume with his mother that he had been "set up." I wrote also that the "wanton destruction of humanity" exemplified by the life and death of George Jackson, if allowed to go on, would "consume us all."

An outpouring of mail has since accused me of all sorts of sins—including some from those who so admired Jackson that they insist his humanity was not destroyed but enhanced by his harsh experience. But most letters and even some editorials have accused me of charging that Jackson's death was "set up" by the authorities. Of course, I did not, and would not, do that without any supporting evidence.

Another principal accusation is that in writing that Jackson had been imprisoned "at 19 for one year to life for confessing to a \$70 robbery," I was guilty of understating his criminal record.

Maybe so. At age 15, he attempted a department store break-in for which he was shot twice by policemen and served a year in the Paso Robles youth facility. At 16, he was accused of numerous robberies in Kern County, Calif., but claimed to have pleaded guilty to one only to escape being charged with others he "knew nothing about." He escaped from the county jail, and later was charged with participating in the \$70 gas-station robbery.

Of that charge, he wrote in 1970 in a brief autobiographical sketch for his book, *Prison Letters*: "I accepted a deal—I agreed to confess and spare the county court costs in return for a light county jail sentence. I confessed but when time came for sentencing they tossed me into the penitentiary with one to life. That was in 1960. I was 18 years old. I've been here ever since."

That is the entire record that one columnist called "as long as your arm," and for it Jackson served about twelve years in prison, more than seven in solitary confinement. If anything, detailing this record of "crime and punishment" emphasizes how senselessly and brutally society reacted at every turn to Jackson's early transgressions; moreover, it is still doing so, every day, in other cases, and turning thousands of young offenders into hardened criminals.

If that is not "wanton destruction of humanity," what is it?

It is also apparent from my corre-

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spondence that many persons do not realize that George Jackson and the two other "Soledad Brothers" were only accused—never convicted—of killing a guard at Soledad Prison. In fact, their trial was to have resumed only two days after the San Quentin killings, and the circumstances in which they were charged by the Soledad authorities—six days after the guard's death—raised many questions as yet unanswered.

But the primary charge in almost every critical letter I received was that I had shown no concern for the other men killed at San Quentin, particularly the white guards. Here are excerpts from a letter I have written to a thoughtful correspondent who made that accusation:

"It is most interesting to me how many people—from those who are literate and experienced, as you are, to those who are almost illiterate and hate-filled and pathetic in their venom—have written to say that my sympathy was misplaced and should have been for the dead guards, that I should specifically have written about them, or about—for instance—the couple recently murdered in their candy store in Brooklyn. I believe this is symbolic of something that is corroding us; we are not willing to face up to the true problems of our life and times but only to the symptoms and surface consequences. (As, for instance, we are making a hue and cry about the horrors of busing pupils to integrate schools—far more hue and cry than ever was heard about segregated schools.)

"But I insist I was not writing about the dead guards . . . or the Brooklyn candy store. I was trying as best I could to get at the true problem—and I said in my article that it was more important to face up to the life of George Jackson than to his death. The truth of that life is what caused the death of those guards, just as much as it caused the death of Jackson himself, just as it steadily destroys so much of our common humanity.

"To grieve for the guards . . . but not to face the truth of what our society does to human beings like George Jackson—and by the thousands—is to worry about symptoms and surface consequences and not about root causes.

"So I must tell you that, no, I cannot be more 'even-handed,' as you would wish; I will go on, as long as I can, trying to get to the core of things, as best I can. I freely concede a limited ability in that regard."