

Massacre at Attica

The five-day rebellion by prisoners at the Attica Correctional Facility has been crushed, but at a terrible price. This gloomy, gray-walled prison near Buffalo will forever carry the stain of yesterday's gruesome mass tragedy in which nine hostages and 28 convicts were killed.

The deaths of these persons by knives and gunfire reflects a barbarism wholly alien to civilized society. Prisoners slashed the throats of utterly helpless, unarmed guards whom they had held captive through the around-the-clock negotiations, in which the inmates held out for an increasingly revolutionary set of demands. Police officers storming into the prison to rescue the hostages and restore order were stirred to savage retaliation by the horror within.

What began last Thursday as a long-foreseeable protest against inhuman prison conditions, with an initial list of grievances that many citizens could support, degenerated into a bloodbath that can only bring sorrow to all Americans. Most members of the observation panel assembled at the request of the prisoners to help mediate their dispute with state officials appear genuinely to have tried to avert an explosion, but some seemed bent on making any settlement impossible.

The contribution of Black Panther Bobby Seale seems to have been particularly negative, that of an incendiary, not a peacemaker. Far from seeking to defuse the situation, he came away from the prisoners with a declaration that they would hold their hostages until "all political prisoners," including Angela Davis and the Soledad Brothers, had been freed. Such counsel was an invitation to disaster.

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The state had responded positively to every reasonable demand put forward by the rebels. It had agreed to make 28 concessions concerning the liberalization of prison procedures, the availability of better food and medical care, more recreation time and improved rehabilitation programs. Society's unconscionable slowness in introducing prison reforms, in this state and generally across the country, is perhaps best reflected in the fact that such obviously desirable changes had to be authorized under duress of a riot.

But, as reasonable demands were met, the prisoners added unreasonable ones—asylum in some "nonimperialistic" country, total amnesty and removal of the prison superintendent. Governor Rockefeller was unquestionably right in ruling out both amnesty and a forced shift in wardens.

In the light of the tragic end result, more question surrounds the wisdom of the Governor's rejection of a unanimous plea by the observation panel that he make a personal visit to Attica as a means of helping to restore sanity among the rebels. That request, made after eSale had flown back to the West Coast, originated with such moderates in the panel as Representative Herman Badillo and State Senator John J. Dunne, who were convinced that hotheads among the prisoners were only temporarily in command and that a Rockefeller appearance would provide the extra time needed for an agreement on release of the hostages and restoration of order. Whether their strategy could, indeed, have prevented the aslughter that ensued can now never be known.

Certainly the progressive unreasonableness shown by some of the prisoners and the holding of knives at the throats of the hostages provided much basis for the official conclusion that neither compromise nor delay could effect anything useful. It was the prisoners' intransigence when confronted with a final appeal "to achieve a peaceful resolution of the situation" that left the prison strewn with the dead.

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Out of yesterday's holocaust must come a recognition that the nation has been living on borrowed time in its failure to correct the abysmal conditions that make life intolerable in Attica and virtually every other penal institution. It is as unfair to correctional officers as it is to prisoners to have such conditions continue.

The state has a duty to implement swiftly the concessions it has already pledged at Attica and to move forward to more fundamental reforms. Only two weeks ago a state legislative committee found the penal system in such disarray that even to apply the term "correction" to it bordered on the ludicrous. Prophetically, it warned that nothing basic had changed in the "archaic conditions" that had touched off a violent one-day prisoner takeover at another state prison last November. Unless change came soon, the committee said, that earlier disturbance would merely be a "prelude to a nightmare."

Now that the nightmare has occurred, the answer must not be more repression and increasingly bloody nightmares, but thoroughgoing reform.