

The Price of Violence

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Sept. 17—The events at Attica prison raise terrible questions for Americans: about the racial divide in our society, about the prison system, about official truthfulness and political courage. Tom Wicker, who was there, has written of all these with moving restraint. At a distance, the episode evokes some general thoughts on violence.

Those of us who can take for granted the advantages of life in a political democracy should beware of smugness in denouncing the use of violence to change the system. It is too easy to say that violent tactics can never be justified.

Was it wrong for the American colonists to take arms against King George and his ministers? Were Jewish underground groups wrong in their activities in mandatory Palestine, or Algerians in their guerrilla war against the French? Would it have been morally illegitimate for the inmates of a German concentration camp to use force against their oppressors if they could have done so effectively?

When the channels of access to political influence are open to every-

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one in a society, then violent means cannot be justified. But is there such a perfect society anywhere?

It took the explosion in Watts to make many white Americans begin to realize the desperate conditions of life in the urban ghettos of the North. Britain is often cited as a model of democracy, but the Roman Catholics of Northern Ireland acquired civil rights as elementary as equality in voting only after they turned to provocative mass demonstrations.

There are, then, groups with inadequate access to the levers of democratic power. For them violence may be the only effective means of political expression. And there can hardly be a more extreme example of such a case than a group of largely black prison inmates: The undisputed facts of the Attica tragedy show that the prisoners faced appalling conditions and had no peaceful way to challenge them effectively.

But frustration of political grievances does not alone justify violence. Moral judgment depends also, in the end, on the nature of the violent act and its consequences.

It is one thing to block streets, another to kill. And violence does not usually stay under control: it escalates. The consequence may not be the desired social change but reaction. And whatever the political result, any violence involves the risk of brutalization. Even the milder forms of student revolt, restricted to foul language and disrespect, degrade the civility of the classroom. The question is whether any gain is worth these or bloodier costs.

For those reasons, philosophers of liberal democracy argue that the only legitimate use of violence in an open society is to call attention to blocked political channels, to areas of official or public insensitivity. Once the fault has been dramatized, the political process must be left to correct it. That may be slow, but the attempt to force faster change by continuing violence or guerrilla tactics is likely to bring results worse than the disease.

In bitter hindsight, the dangers of violence can be seen clearly enough in what happened at Attica prison. If only the inmates had been able to dramatize their complaints and then accept a reasonable settlement. . . . But of course the situation could never be reasonable. It led to the death of a guard, to fear, to hatred among the forces of law and in the surrounding community. So far had the process gone, so brutalized had public feelings become, that many citizens of Attica simply refused to believe the evidence that hostages had been killed not by the prisoners but by the guns of the attacking guards.

That power of fear and hate to overcome evidence is familiar. After the Chicago convention of 1968, Americans who had seen on television the official brutality that an inquiry called a "police riot" nevertheless said when polled that the treatment of demonstrators had been right.

Which leads to a larger point about the horror at Attica prison: It cannot be seen in isolation from recent American history. Violence leads to violence, and brutality to increased tolerance for more brutality.

For officials to commit or condone violence has the most corrupting social effect, and it is from this that the United States has especially suffered. When the police can club innocent people in a hotel room and go uncriticized, or National Guard men kill students without being prosecuted, the whole society is brutalized. And so it is, of course, when American soldiers are known to take part in the torture of prisoners, or when the President intervenes in behalf of a soldier convicted of killing babies.

The Times of London, in writing about the final assault on Attica, mentioned Kent State and the Mylai massacre and indiscriminate American bombing in Vietnam. All, it said, were disturbing examples of "power being used without the control and discipline expected of a civilized country."

That is the burden of decent governments: to be civilized: Individual violence is dangerous enough. But it is much worse when Governors and Presidents depart from the path of restraint, for they are meant to speak for civilization.