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# The Prisoners

Nathaniel Hawthorne characterized it: "The black flower of civilized society, a prison."

Events of recent days have forced the people of this state and nation to contemplate that black flower. A melancholy preoccupation, it can be instructive only if public officials and private citizens—and inmates, too—break free from the prison of their own preconceptions.

The first thing needed is a scrupulously fair inquiry into the circumstances which led up to the revolt of the prisoners at Attica and the deaths of forty guards and inmates an inquiry that now seems well on its way.

But there is risk in even the best official investigation as previous inquiries into comparable social breakdowns have shown. Too often, the investigation serves as a pretext for delay, then the final report evokes a controversy which is a substitute for action.

The compiling of an honest record would discharge a debt of honor to the dead. It would help illuminate the murky record on everything that happened before and after the mass killings. Yet one fact is plain without any investigation: What happened at Attica could have happened almost anywhere.

Virtually every large prison for serious offenders is overcrowded. Its custodial staff is undertrained. Its doctors, psychiatrists and teachers are few in number and often weak in quality. Its food ranges from mediocre to inedible. Its racial composition is steadily changing as blacks leave the backwaters of the rural South and enter the far-riskier mainstream of city life.

The mood in prisons is tense because drug addiction, sexual frustration, antisocial resentments, racial hurts, criminal guilt and fantasies of escape create tensions. A prison is a community of defeated men.

Knowing all this, the public has to ask itself whether it is prepared to pay the price in higher taxes to provide more buildings, more professional staff, better-trained guards, better food and higher wages for work done by prison inmates. Since tax-conscious suburban residents are voting down bond issues and budgets which would provide better schools for their children, it is utopia to assume that people are eager to improve prisons for criminals whom they fear and resent.

Indeed, the public has yet to make the necessary investment of public funds in properly caring for emotionally disturbed and potentially delinquent children and adolescents. Money and talent ought to be spent on saving these children first rather than waiting until they require rehabilitation as adults.

If conditions within prisons are not radically transformed, future prison uprisings are almost certain. Prison inmates are usually men with a sense of powerlessness, lacking in self-control. In their lives, only a gun or a knife wielded to commit a crime has given them a fleeting sense of power. In negotiating with inmates, extraordinary official patience and flexibility is required since it takes time for prisoners to learn the limits of power.

The alternative of refusing to negotiate with prisoners, especially when their grievances are as genuine as they were at Attica, also entails high risk of a loss of life. Neither course provides any guarantee of a bloodless outcome. It is easy to say in retrospect that officials could have managed a specific episode better. But the responsibility does not stop with a particular Governor or National Guard commander or prison warden.

Americans have to ask themselves whether they want every evidence of malfunction in their society—a street demonstration by political dissenters, a campus rebellion, a slum riot, a prison revolt—suppressed by official violence. The moral rationale for putting violent, undisciplined men in prison is that the larger society is observing higher standards of human behavior. If that society proves itself reckless and prone to violence, the power to incarcerate remains, but what becomes of the moral authority?

Throughout history, the ordeal of imprisonment has instilled toughness in some men and broken the spirit of others. Men have found religious zeal within prison walls and others, like the Wobblies or Sacco and Vanzetti, have shaped or tested political convictions there. Prisons may radicalize some of their inmates but they remain, as they have always been, extremely poor starting places from which to reform or reorganize a society. Those who encourage and romanticize prison rebels are helping to make victims, not heroes.

The upheaval in the prisons is part of the wider crisis in the nation's public institutions. Here, as elsewhere, the renewal of authority can be accomplished only if it is accompanied by the reconciling power of reform.