

The Administration's Vision of the

By JOSEPH RHODES Jr.

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—Ever since Vice President Agnew asked President Nixon to remove me from the Scranton Commission, I have followed the statements and actions of Mr. Agnew in a perhaps hopeless attempt to understand what vision of the world motivates this Administration. Because Mr. Agnew speaks more frankly than Mr. Nixon, I had thought that his views might reveal the deeper philosophies that underlie the policies and directions of the President. No statement of the Vice President's has more troubled and confused me than his recent denouncement of the leadership of black America during his trip to Africa last summer. Since that extraordinary condemnation of our black leadership, I have waited for some evidence that might explain this bitter attack by the Vice President.

The article that Mr. Agnew wrote

for the Op-Ed Page last week on the "root causes of Attica" provides such an explanation. It offers an insight into this Administration's approach to the problems and injustices that poor Americans and poor black Americans in particular suffer. The vision of America that Mr. Agnew projects is a revealing one if only because of its detachment from the reality that is the common experience of millions of impoverished and helpless Americans.

If I understand the Vice President's point of view correctly, he feels deeply outraged that some black leaders in America have attributed the Attica tragedy to the basic conditions that reign in our nation, the most severe such condition being the powerlessness of poor black people. He cites statements by "heretofore responsible Negro" leaders as an unreasonable allegiance to the "radical ideological premise of original sin which holds every outbreak of violence in our so-

ciety to be further evidence of the intrinsic evil of the system."

Nothing infuriates our Vice President more than all the fuss over the deaths of the black prisoners: "To compare the loss of life by those who violate the society's law with a loss of life of those whose job it is to uphold it—represents not simply an assault on human sensibility, but an insult to reason." In his mind the Attica tragedy happened because of an expression of "criminal arrogance fed by the long-time accommodation of moderate spokesmen, white and black alike, to the extremism of word and deed practiced by black power militants." Incredibly, Mr. Agnew holds the black leadership of America responsible for the violence at Attica.

I have only one question for Mr. Agnew. Why, sir, do you think there is such a high proportion of black people in American prisons? Why are 80 per cent of the men at Attica black



World

men and nearly all the dead prisoners of Attica, dead black men? There are only two possible reasons for this: either black men have a natural proclivity for crime, which is a racist point of view, or something about the American system tends to disproportionately produce black criminals and black convicts. Mr. Agnew, if the latter is the case, then there exists a serious inequity in the actual conditions of life for black Americans and not simply an excess of inflammatory rhetoric by black leaders.

Is it possible, Mr. Vice President, that so many black people end up in prison because of the economic and social conditions that black Americans endure? You referred to the nurturing of the "roots of violence such as occurred at Attica and, not long before, at San Quentin." But did you bother to check on the actual circumstances that led to the ten-year imprisonment of George Jackson? As a lawyer, you could only agree that if a white middle-class youth in California had committed Jackson's "crime," he would never have spent ten years of his life in California maximum-security prisons.

Just because a black man ends up in a prison does not remove him from the role of humanity. I wish you could open your eyes and realize that thousands of black people sit in prisons because they are black and because they are poor. Thousands more live in conditions only slightly better than those of Attica.

When our Vice President refers to the "previous confrontations between society's authority and antisocial force" he probably has Kent State and Jackson State in mind. The great threat facing our society is not that the cries of the suffering will provide "the violent-prone" with a "civilized rationale for their psychopathic proclivities." Some of these "violent-prone" people wear the uniform of the Ohio National Guard and the New York State police. To have waited a few more days before unleashing these armed men on Attica would not have amounted to an "acquiescence to the demands of the criminal element." It might have saved a few lives, human lives, convict or otherwise.

If our society comes to the point where it regards criminals as non-humans and deserving of any punishment that they get, we will have advanced tragically closer to the Fascist society Mr. Agnew so desperately wants to avoid. The "storm troopers" were not criminals in prisons; they were officers of the law and carried out their horror under the "civilized rationale" of upholding law and order.

Joseph Rhodes Jr., a graduate student at Harvard, was a member of the Presidential commission investigating student unrest.

SEP 71
7
775