

More Atticas to Come?

WASHINGTON — After weeks of gruesome testimony about the My Lai massacre, it took a strong stomach to wade through the testimony a National Guardsman gave about brutality inside Attica prison after the inmate rebellion was crushed.

But let us hope that millions of Americans noted the revelations of James P. Watson, a 24-year-old law student and a National Guardsman.

WATSON TOLD of seeing beatings, pokings and proddings of prisoners who he said showed no resistance whatever. Special objects of these brutal pummelings were inmates who had cried of "black power" — as though the state troopers and prison guards felt some holy mandate to try to beat the entire black revolution to death with their clubs and rifle butts.

It was this kind of brutality and racism, constant and dehumanizing, that caused the prison uprising at Attica in the first place, and no amount of bogeyman talk about "outside revolutionaries" can hide that truth. This society is hopelessly doomed to a nightmare of violent revolt, outside the prisons as well as inside, unless it shows a sense of justice and compassion and develops prison arrangements where inmates are regarded as people.

But we have had no prison reform, and are not likely to see much, because even the politicians who claim to be most enlightened don't much give a damn.

Gov. Nelson Rockefeller was warned many times that brutality at Attica was going to produce a riot. But nothing changed.

The terrible truth is that prison reform is not desired by much of this society. You need only have eavesdropped on telephone calls to me this last week to know that millions of Americans are motivated mostly by vengeance and vindictiveness; they say convicts are meant to be punished, and the more miserable they are made, the better.

Add the factors of race (85 percent of Attica inmates are black or Puerto Rican, all of their guards white) and political militancy (the leaders of uprisings are automatically branded as "revolutionaries") and you increase the public feeling that beating inmates is not "brutality" and killing them is not a crime.

Most Americans still look for some cheap, simple solution. A noted prison chaplain thinks the panacea is to establish a separate maximum security institution for locking up all "hard-core, militant, Marxist revolutionaries."

IN THE WAKE of the Attica massacre, more are radicalized now than ever, and it is naive to assume that they will again become vegetables, docilely enduring abuses, once they are separated from the "militants."

Rockefeller now says there will be some reforms at Attica. But no one says what reforms, or how soon.