

A White Man's View: A

*Reviewed by
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and Owa*

Geraldine Brooks, currently with the National Urban Coalition planning a national minority conference on human experimentation, had a close friend who died at Attica. Owa is a writer and former prison inmate.

Four years ago, inmates of the New York state prison at Attica rebelled against unbearable conditions and held out for six days before Sept. 13, 1971, when troopers moved on them with guns blazing. As a result of the rebellion, 43 people died: one prison guard, 10 hostages and 32 inmates. All but the prison guard died as a result of the assault.

Tom Wicker's account of this event, "A Time to Die," published earlier this year, is likely to become history's primary source on the incident — a white man's history, but at least the work of a white man who witnessed much of what he describes and who tries to be fair, to understand what was involved.

From the right, Wicker may look like a bleeding-heart; from the left, like an

apologist for the system. A self-declared moderate, he appears stuck out there somewhere in the middle of it all. As a matter of fact, that's exactly where he was at Attica: stuck in the middle of it.

When the Attica incident began, Wicker, as associate editor of The New York Times, was in Washington enjoying a good dinner and reflecting on "how far he had come." When he was told that some rebellious prison inmates wanted him to serve on a team of outside observers, he thought that it would not take more than a few hours of his time. That was his first mistake.

His second mistake was to misjudge the men on both sides, their passions and how deeply they were committed to their positions.

The overriding concern expressed by the men trapped in the sordid squalor of Attica Prison's D Yard was for dignity. The suave and articulate officials, who waited with awesome firepower at their command, felt concern only for the restoration of "order." The observers' committee, except for its radical elements, seemed concerned with reaching a compromise,

though only the committee's members know how dignity can be compromised.

"A Time to Die" is a story of power, absolute and corrupt and therefore absolutely corrupting. It is a story of men both powerful and powerless, holding the power to destroy life yet powerless to choose any other course, because any sign of weakness would reach down to the very core of their power. As the moments of Wicker's Attica experience slip into dull hopelessness through endless hours of demands by inmates and counterdemands by prison authorities, this problem becomes clearer and clearer.

The story shows examples of courage born out of desperation on both sides of the line. Correction Commissioner Oswald's decision to meet with the men of D Yard was indeed an act of courage. Yet the commissioner could not bring himself to meet these desperate men on their own ground. Thus, the wheels of confrontation ground to a slow, agonizing halt with Oswald's demand for a meeting on "neutral ground," an expression that reminded prisoners of the "pacified ground"

Brave, Cogent Look at

Book World

A TIME TO DIE. By Tom Wicker.

(Quadrangle, 342 pp \$10.)

in Vietnam, napalmed and defoliated.

Wicker's powers of observation give the reader what seem to be cogent insights into the men with whom he could relate: Oswald, Dunbar, Kunstler and a host of others. And in an effort at journalistic objectivity, he attempts to show the forces at work: tradition, change, racism. Yet beyond the abstract concerns of justice and dignity, Wicker seems at a loss to understand the men in D Yard; men who groveled in poverty, ignorance and self-hatred while beholding with wonderment the stainless-steel, plastic-coated, petroleum-driven American affluence.

When Oswald demanded a meeting on neutral ground, the inmates presented counterdemands: 28 points, of which 25 were basic and rudimentary improvements in the life of prisoners or parolees. The negotiations balanced on two demands: the immediate removal of the warden, Vincent Mancusi, and amnesty on charges connected with the insurrection. Mancusi eventually offered to resign, in the interests of a peaceful settlement, but according to Wicker, Oswald refused because it would look too much like giving in to the rabble. As for amnesty, later events made the question irrelevant.

Wicker and the others, trying to avoid a blood bath, pinned their hopes on Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, imperious and detached, who asked Oswald, "If he comes to Attica, might not the inmates then demand the presence of the President of the United States?" The governor spoke of the institution of government

and the danger it faced; he regarded the men in D Yard who had taken such extreme measures to win adequate food, religious freedom and a modernized educational system, as revolutionaries. Rockefeller felt that "if tolerated, they pose a serious threat to the ability of free government to preserve order." And as far as the governor was concerned, order was to be reestablished at any cost. Nothing the black and Puerto Rican officials on the observers' committee could do could have altered in any way the basic and very white decision of the governor.

Wicker describes massive, mean and certain death with "masked, helmeted and booted troopers" pouring into D Yard, ripping and tearing like mad, snarling dogs let off the leash. His astounding account of this assault raised some questions as to his sources; by his own account, Wicker was in a part of the prison where he could not hear the shooting, yet he reports on the event in unusual detail. But his report is certainly more reliable than the official stories that were handed to the press at the time (and to the troopers preparing for their attack): tales of hostages with slashed throats and castrated bodies. The truth: not one dead hostage slashed or mutilated; all who died were killed by the troopers' murderous barrage.

The official reaction when this discrepancy was noted: The early reports were "not meant to be factual accounts as to the cause of death." If the authorities would lie to the press and the world, what kind of promise could

an inmate get on neutral ground?

Wicker was a brave man, going out into that yard after he understood what was really going on, realizing the very real and present physical danger to himself. Then his bravery slipped across that all too thin line of definition into desperation. Desperate to have his system work, he saw his entire world graded in those

fateful days: the spirited wines, the succulent lamb chops and notable companions, all seemed light-years away in the blood, rain and swill of D Yard. He did his part, he took the risk and understood the stakes. Now there was nothing more he could do.

Did Wicker understand that the prison held, everyone's fate, that no one was safe, either the detained or

Attica

the detainees? The Attica incident showed that our rulers are men of unprincipled principles and insane drives who chauffeur us unreturnably to the brink of disaster. Any government that finds it necessary to lie and murder in its attempt to deny the least of us should be a warning to the most of us. Then perhaps we will understand the reality that "Attica is all of us."