

Penal Reform—When?

To the Editor:

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"To negotiate at knifepoint is unthinkable," we are told. When have authorities ever negotiated on prison conditions without violence or threat of violence? How else can prisoners work for reform of penal institutions which even the Vice President admits "are not perfect nor beyond criticism"?

Consider the recent incident of totally peaceful protest at the Federal "Correctional Institution" at Danbury. A group of nonviolent inmates (mostly conscientious objectors to violence, whether in Vietnam or at home) wished to call attention to patent inequities in the parole system and to the unaccountability of the United States Parole Board. They did not riot. They took no hostages. They made no threats. As peacefully as Mr. Nixon, Mr. Agnew and Mr. Rockefeller would want them to behave, they registered their protest by means of a hunger strike.

Results: (1) immediate placement "in solitary" at Danbury; (2) transfer in chains (handcuffs alone being deemed insufficient to restrain these totally nonviolent men) to the Springfield, Mo., hospital for Federal prisoners; (3) incalculable anguish to families who were not notified of the transfer until weeks later and who cannot find out, readily, whether the men are still at Springfield, elsewhere or in transit (and these are white, middle-class, nonviolent men); (4) with few exceptions, an almost complete news blackout by all media, either on orders from the Federal Bureau of Prisons or self-imposed because peaceful protest is not newsworthy; (5) final evidence that peaceful protest does not penetrate prison walls to reach responsible officials.

"To reform penal institutions takes time," we are told. Time starting when? Never from the time that nonviolent inmates, or their families, or humane outsiders identify abuses. Even talk of reform dates only from the time when a riot or massacre makes impossible, at least temporarily, continued callous indifference to inhumane treatment of prisoners.

This is the real tragedy, not only of Attica but of the larger society.

MOTHER OF AN INMATE
New York, Sep. 26, 1971