

Tragedy at San Quentin...

It is not possible yet to pin down the grisly sequence of events at San Quentin Prison last Saturday. Only the immediate consequences of the tragedy are clear: three inmates and three guards are dead—some shot, some slashed in the throat with a dull razor blade. The escape attempt, according to prison authorities, was led by George Jackson—himself now dead—who was awaiting trial for the murder of a guard thrown over a third-floor cellblock railing at Soledad Prison in 1970. The official theory is that the gun used to launch the attack was smuggled in to the prisoner by a lawyer only minutes before the outbreak.

George Jackson may have been innocent of the Soledad crime and even of last week's horror. Certainly the lawyer, now being sought by the police, is not to be prejudged. But if prejudgment is to be ruled out on one side of this ghastly affair, it must surely be ruled out on the other.

It is one thing to cite, by way of extenuation, Jackson's bitterness at having spent an indefensible ten years in jail for a \$70 robbery or to cite in general the grievance in a white-dominated society. It is a totally different thing to give currency to the vague, unsupported and unbelievable charge made by Jackson's mother that the whole episode was a "set up," staged by the warden and his staff in order to shoot Jackson down—at the cost of the agonizing death of three of their own guards.

The dead prisoner's family is entitled, in its grief, to believe whatever gives it comfort. For the rest of us it is no contribution to the national good—in this case or in the courthouse slayings for which Angela Davis awaits trial—to explain away acts of savagery as the inevitable reaction to social inequities.

Those responsible for the killings at San Quentin, at Soledad or in the Marin County courthouse from which a judge was dragged out and shot a year ago were not martyrs bringing relief to the oppressed. They were destroyers of law itself and therefore of society's best chance to do justice and redeem its failures. The true social revolutionary's hope in this country is still in the life of the law, not the death of its guardians.