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They're Not Political Prisoners

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By MALCOLM BRADY

I have been watching our hagiographers at work on George Jackson, and he's finely tuned to their purpose— young, articulate, black and, now, a putative martyr. But I wonder if we can any longer afford our myths, our Lives of Saints or our horror stories, and if it's not imperative that we begin to tell each other the plain truth.

Jackson did stand for something. He played out once again the bleak and apparently hopeless drama of the individual versus the State. It's clear to me that he meant to put a bloody and forgettable period to the unequal contest. He wasn't running anywhere when he was shot—there's no way out down the hill toward which he was heading. How could he have hoped to scale a twenty-foot wall?

I know this because I spent many years in San Quentin as a prisoner. I am intimately familiar with life and death in California prisons, and because of the special knowledge this has given me I am often appalled at the mistaken assumptions, exaggera-

tions, and, sometimes, outright lies on which liberal and radical writers base their current outrage at prison conditions.

At the risk of being thought an apologist for the California Department of Corrections, I would like to set down some considerations which are being glossed over if considered at all.

It is being said that Jackson was a political prisoner because he was sentenced on a charge for which a white man of nineteen would have received probation. I'm inclined to agree that there are areas in California where blacks are not treated impartially, but the suggestion of systematic political prejudice is absurd. Probation is always a desperate gamble and robbery, even second-degree, is treated gingerly. Further, Jackson had an extensive juvenile record, and for robbery, and had already served time in the California Youth Authority.

The second leg of the political-prisoner hypothesis is the abnormal length of Jackson's confinement. Jackson would have been eligible for parole

within a year, and, if his prison record had been simply average, would have been paroled at the end of three years, possibly four. He could have been something of a disciplinary problem and still been out in five.

It's possible to slip through San Quentin as a gray shadow and you are caught in the works of some mindless automated factory—after a certain period, not knowing what else to do, it disgorges you. This is assuming you want out. Not all prisoners do, or, rather, freedom is not their priority. But now we are examining a function of choice. It's possible to imagine that Jackson drove himself against the prison, the symbol of a hated and alien society, as a revolutionary act, but I have witnessed similar rebellions by white prisoners that rose out of nothing more than a smouldering hatred of all authority. Assuming Jackson's actions were revolutionary in nature, what were the prison officials supposed to do—permit his protests? Permit him to kill? What of those other deaths? Were the California authorities so set on Jackson's murder that they

killed five other men to cover their tracks? How can this be made credible? Yet clearly those five corpses were no obstacle to those who accepted the theory of Jackson's murder.

Equally, why isn't it considered that those men who rose up to demand their rights at Attica had never been so delicate about the rights, the property and even the lives of others? Why isn't it noted that their play-acting and posturing, the immediate formation of a military organization in their ranks, looks like nothing so much as an attempt to copy that which they so bitterly protested?

Jackson's fate, the fate of those at Attica and prisoners throughout our country is dreadful and it cries out for reform, but to distort fact, to encourage false myth does not correct an evil, but only creates another. We should suspect any martyr as much as we should suspect our need to have him.

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