

Readings in Preparation for Lecture on Uses of Attica

Motive 1: The Prison Reform Motive

Characters of Motive

"Slaughter at Attica," *Nation*, 213 (27 Sep 1971), 258.

One of the convicts in the maximum security "correctional facility" at Attica, N.Y., addressed the ad hoc committee of observers assembled within the prison walls: "We do not want to rule; we only want to live . . . but if any of you gentlemen own dogs, you're treating them better than we're treated here." On that basic fact there is general agreement. Only twelve days before the uprising, State Correction Commissioner Russell G. Oswald sent a taped message to the 2,000 inmates outlining the steps he was working on to make conditions more nearly bearable. "What I'm asking for is time," he told the prisoners, but time ran out on him. About half the prisoners rose in what amounted to an insurrection which, prudent foresight suggests, is a harbinger of worse to come. They had no firearms. The assault force, also numbering about 1,000, was heavily armed. When they had done their work, thirty-nine men were dead--nine hostages out of the thirty-eight that the convicts had seized, and thirty convicts.²

The Demands of the Prisoners

Editorial, *The Charlotte Observer*, rpt. in *Editorials on File*, 2 (16-30 Sep 1971), 1247.

"No activity of a people so exposes their humanity or inhumanity, their character, their capacity for charity in its most generous form as the treatment they accord persons convicted of crime." . . . The "demands" made by rioters in Cell Block D provide evidence of the animal-like existence to which we relegate society's offenders. Attica's prisoners asked for adequate food, water and shelter. They wanted religious freedom, an effective narcotics treatment program, a healthy diet (fewer pork dishes, more fresh fruit). They wanted a Spanish-language library and less censorship of publications and letters.⁶

Retaking the Prison

"Bloody Attica: Furies Unleashed," *Newsweek*, 78 (27 Sep 1971), 22.

Under cover of a helicopter-borne tear-gas barrage, a raiding party of 200 state troopers unleashed a fusillade of rifle and shotgun

fire that crushed the rebellion in a matter of minutes. But in the process, they killed thirty of their inmates, injured more than 200 others--and also gunned down nine of the hostages they had sought to save. It was the bloodiest finale to a prison uprising in the nation's history, and it left many Americans with the painful conviction that, as one of the anguished observers put it, "there must have been a better way."²¹

The climax had been building through four days of excruciating suspense on both sides of the turreted walls of New York's Attica Correctional Facility, where 1200 rebel convicts held 39 guards and civilians hostage. As the hours ticked by, authorities agonized over how to set the hostages free, and a citizens' committee of "observers" shuttled between the two camps trying desperately to forestall a deadly confrontation. Then, in a spasm of violence, Attica added its name to the roll call of modern American tragedies.²²

Lessons from Attica

Representative William F. Ryan, speech on the floor of United States Congress, House of Representatives, 15 Sep 1971. Rpt. *Congressional Record*, 15 Sep 1971, H8495.

We have witnessed a dreadful nightmare at Attica. Now we must insure that that nightmare is not an omen of things to come. Out of the bloodshed at Attica must come the recognition that this country has been living on borrowed time in its failure to correct the abysmal and inhuman conditions that make life intolerable in virtually every one of our penal institutions. It is high time we committed this Government and the people of this Nation to a total effort to meet the problem of criminal rehabilitation.

In the aftermath of the tragic loss of life at Attica, there has been widespread shock, bewilderment, and anger. But there must be something else as well--there must be a deepening and real concern over the basic failures of our prison system, failures that can never be remedied by the spilling of blood.⁴³

Motive 2: Rejection and Revolution

Characters

Hundred Flowers, 22 Oct 1971, 13.

"One inmate was singled out as a 'leader' by an officer," reads a September 28 Legal Aid Society report filed as an affidavit in Buffalo, New York court, "and led naked to a table in Cellblock A and made to lie down. Guards then spat on him, a lighted cigar was placed in (sic) his penis and lighted cigarettes were put on his stomach. He was then beaten and an officer fiercely kicked him in the testicles."

Haynes, a white, red-haired prisoner said that he suffered from a terminal kidney disorder that required daily treatment. Although he was "urinating blood for six days," he did not receive any medicine until September 30--two and a half weeks after the invasion. After going several days without treatment he asked one of his two prison doctors--Dr. Sternberg, for some medication.

Sternberg refused, telling him, "You're here for doing something. You're not anything to us."

Though he was taken to the prison hospital, September 20, he was still not given any medication. When he asked a nurse for some, she replied, "We'll give you something to stop all your pain until you go to burn in hell."☺

"The Battle of Attica," *Guardian*, 22 Sep 1971, 9.

Let there be no mistake because many of the 1000 or more prisoners who took part in the rebellion are classified by the bourgeoisie as "common criminals"--the Battle of Attica was a monumental struggle against the class and racial oppression waged by the victims of capitalist society against the agents of the victimizers.

The State of New York, led by one of the richest men in the world, quite unnecessarily murdered 41 people--including 10 of its own servants who unfortunately stood in the way--in order to assert the principle of absolute

class and racial authority and dominance."

"If Necessary . . . We'll Do It Again," *Chicago Seed*, 7.6, 8.

He only had a few weeks left to go. The other prisoners knew him well, he was a leader of the rebellion whom they (sic)pigs wanted badly to kill. He said, "I'm here, I may not have much time left, but while you're here, you're either in it or not, and I'm in it. They kill you a little bit every day in here, so I'm not afraid to fight for freedom even if they do kill me. I gotta do what I gotta do."

There were these two sentiments. There was the sentiment of the long-term prisoners that their survival as people depended on their being able to change their prison, and there was the sentiments of everybody that there's no way of surviving here if you're not a part of this, if you're not fighting it, it (sic) you're not a part of the struggle against prisons.³³

The Retaking

"If Necessary . . . We'll Do It Again," *Chicago Seed*, 7.6, 8.

"They came in really believing that throats

had been cut and that one of the guards had been castrated. The state patrol had been sitting waiting four days to go in. They were told these lies. . . . One of the reasons that the State Troopers weren't reluctant was because they had been fed all these stories about people standing next to hostages with knives ready to cut their throats, and if they didn't come in and start shooting, then all the hostages would be dead. And besides they were mutilating the guards and castrating the guards and how can you allow this to go on. . . . It was so heavy on the troopers minds, in the guards minds, about the castration--there was such an attempt made to portray the prisoners as animals! The guards would say things to the State Troopers like "Look at this guy, you don't know him, but he's a real motherfucker. We heard he's the one who castrated the guard, . . . what do you think about that? He don't look so tough right now, he's standing here nude, let's cut his nuts off." and they'd pull out a knife and they'd start to play like that.¹⁸

Lessons from Attica

"The Battle of Attica," *Guardian*, 27 Sep 1971, 8.

The Battle of Attica Sept. 9-13 was no small footnote to the history of American revolutionary development. It was a saga of human struggle that must be told and retold in the days and years to come.

To those who sacrificed themselves for freedom in that citadel of repression known as the Attica (N.Y.) Correctional Facility, we who walk the streets can offer no less than a respectful salute for exemplary discipline, heroism, ingenuity, perseverance and solidarity.³⁸

Motive 3: Attica in the Family of Revolution

The Characters and the Conditions

Thomas Lane, "Attica—Revolution in Prison," *Wanderer*, 30 Sep 1971, 14.

When the criminals imprisoned at Attica seized guards as hostages, it was immediately apparent that the leaders of the revolt were trained revolutionaries. The complaints about inhuman treatment were in the revolutionary mode, bearing no relationship whatsoever to actual conditions. Revolutionaries manufacture their pretexts for action in full confidence that our news media will broadcast the lies across the land to build sympathy for the revolution.⁸

"Attica: Story of a Prison Riot." *Human Events*, 15 Sep 1971, 1.

The deadly revolt itself [was] apparently planned over many months by a small, hard core of prisoners, aided and abetted by a group of leftist and legal rights activists. Massaged by Marxist and revolutionary rhetoric, these convicted rapists, bombers, murderers and armed robbers were to become convinced they were not criminals but rather "political prisoners," taken off the streets and incarcerated by an oppressive racist state. To revolt against this state would, therefore, be a praiseworthy "revolutionary act" that

would make each participant a "hero."

Editorial, *Portland [Maine] Evening Express*, 14 Sep 1971, rpt. in *Editorials on File*, 15-30 Sep 1971, 1153.

From what we know of Attica, the facility there was not one of the nation's worst, by any means. New York's relatively new commissioner of correctional services, Russell G. Oswald, is a compassionate expert in penology, who has already introduced reforms at Attica, and in negotiating with the leaders of the rebellion over the weekend made it plain that he would meet many of their demands.¹³

The Uprising

Ralph de Toledano, "Radicals Demand Prisons Be Abolished," *Human Events*, 23 Oct 1971, 9.

A document in this writer's possession proves that the liberal/New Left agitation over the Attica riot is the opening gun of "a national campaign built around the demand that by July 4, 1976, all of the prisoners in all U.S. prisons must be released and the prisons abolished."¹⁰

The Retaking of the Prison

Editorial, *Indianapolis Star*, 16 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 15-30 Sep 1971, 1153.

Governor Rockefeller said: "The tragedy was brought on by the highly organized revolutionary tactics of militants who rejected all efforts at a peaceful settlement. . . . I have ordered a full investigation of all the factors leading to this uprising, including the role that outside forces would appear to have played."

Rockefeller appears well aware that the goading of inmates by inflammatory propaganda and pressures exerted from the outside may have ignited the violence which brought tragedy not only to guards²² and their families but to prisoners as well.²²

Lessons from Attica

Victor Riesel, "Radical 'Inmate Councils' Stir Prison Revolts," *Human Events*, 2 Oct 1971, 8.

There are intelligence reports, propaganda analyses, and Justice Department interpretations of Black Panther party decisions to use the national prison system as the frontier for national revolution. Certainly, such uprisings will be crushed. But just as certainly the rebellions will be launched, not by the heavy majority of prisoners, but by the tiny military cadres which Black Panther Supreme Commander and Minister of Defense Huey Newton talks and writes of. . . .

In correctional facilities ranging from California and Louisiana to the District of Columbia and upper New York, there are "Inmate Councils." And they await the moment.²⁶

“Attica: The Story of a Prison Riot,” *Human Events*, 25 Sep 1971, 6.

America's prisons are clearly one of the new battlegrounds of the revolutionary left. Attica, like the recent shoot-out at San Quentin, is one of many battles unless authorities are firm in their realization that there is no room for compromise with revolutionaries.⁵⁵

Motive 4: Law and Order

The Characters and Conditions

Editorial, *Richmond News Leader*, 14 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 16-30 Sep 1971, 1148.

The convicts of Attica have been found guilty of breaking the established laws of the nation. One need only contemplate the slit throats of the ten murdered prison guards to reaffirm that the convicts of Attica were incarcerated on just grounds.⁴

Editorial, [*Memphis*] *Commercial Appeal*, 14 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 16-30 Sep 1971, 1151.

It was patently wrong to give the inmates of a prison the say as to who runs the institution. A government of law cannot operate if its outlaws are allowed to dictate, through force and terror, the rules under which they are punished.¹⁰

The Retaking

Editorial, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 14 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 16-30 Sep 1971, 1149.

No one in his right mind would want this result if it could have been avoided by any means short of surrender to the prisoners.

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Prison officials had concluded that the situation was getting completely out of hand as prisoners were seen making booby traps, erecting electric barricades, spreading gasoline and handing out weapons to inmates.

In a last ditch effort to achieve a peaceful settlement, prison authorities granted 28 of the convicts' 30 demands. . . .

When a final ultimatum by the prison director was rejected, the attack by the police and correction officers was reluctantly ordered.⁵⁰

Lessons to be Learned from Attica

Editorial, Sioux Falls, SD, *Argus Leader*, 14 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 16-30 Sep 1971, 1150.

They were faced with an armed insurrection within the prison. To have capitulated in even a minor way would have created an intolerable situation in the entire prison structure of their state and, for that matter, in all states. If prisoners could acquire the impression that revolts of this type would be productive and not damaging to the revolvers, they would be tempted to do so again and again.³⁸

Editorial, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 22 Sep 1971, rpt. *Editorials on File*, 16-30 Sep 1971, 1246.

Some black prisoners and members of other minority groups refuse to accept any responsibility for their crimes, claiming they are "political prisoners" of an oppressive, "white racist" system even though they were sent to prison for murder and other violent crimes.

Thus, at Attica, we saw how the militants who led the revolt continued to escalate their demands until they finally held out for complete amnesty from criminal prosecution and transportation out of the United States to a "non-imperialistic country."⁴¹