

Race and racism played down in Attica Report

by Robert N. Taylor

In the wake of the long-awaited report on last year's rebellion at Attica state prison, the reaction among many Black persons associated with Attica has generally been favorable, terming the report an adequate indictment of the American penal system.

Yet several complaints common among Blacks finding disagreement with the report have been aired and chief among them is the belief that the significance of race in the origin and development of the Attica rebellion and blood letting was consciously played down.

Milton Williams, a Black member of the investigative team, speaking at a Columbia University graduate school forum recently, indicated that in his opinion, race and racism were actually two of the most important factors behind the outbreak and killing at Attica.

"In essence," said Williams, "the reasons for what happened at Attica are no different than those which caused the Harlem, Watts, Detroit, Newark and other riots of the mid- and late sixties."

The commission itself, though officially placing a

lesser emphasis on race, reached many conclusions which buttress Williams' contention.

"Rather than being revolutionary conspirators bent on destruction," the body found, "the Attica rebels were part of a new breed of young, more aware inmates—largely Black—who came to prison full of deep feelings of alienation and hostility against the established system of law and government, enhanced self-esteem, racial pride and political awareness and an unwillingness to accept the petty humiliation and racism that characterized prison life."

Herbert X. Blyden, an articulate former inmate during the rebellion, has echoed this emphasis on the new breed of Black prisoners and further pointed out that this rebellion also, like others throughout recent history, accomplished very few gains for Black people.

"The Bloody Massacre which (took place at Attica) shows that the pray-in stage, the wade-in stage, the sit-in stage, yes even the riot stage, has failed to alter the course of this repressive system of injustice," said Blyden.

A further characteristic of

the Black and Third World inmates in the revolt that has been noted was a strong belief in the humanity of the prison officials, a faith which one general-counsel for the commission said approached the realm of naivete.

The inmates clearly believed that as long as they held the guards as hostages, there would be no assault on them. Thus they held out continuously for complete amnesty, even after the 28 of their demands had allegedly been agreed to.

The white hostages, said Williams, were a kind of insurance, but an insurance which held little sway with the prison officials and state police who were set on an armed assault. As a matter of fact, he added, in spite of the impression given to the outside world, "the inmates were never told by the observers or anyone else that the state was adamant against amnesty and that their choice was between acceptance of the 28 points or facing an armed assault."

So strong were the inmates' beliefs that an armed assault would not occur as long as they held the hostages that even when the assault actually began, there were prisoners

in the yard telling other inmates not to run and shouting "they (the state police) are only using rubber bullets," revealed a commission counsel.

However, as all the prisoners soon realized, the bullets were real and many men died.

The report has shed further light on the already questionable reasoning underlying and guiding the assault. It is especially worth noting that even though it was known by police commanders that there was hostility among their men towards the inmates, and further that Gov. Rockefeller had ordered all Attica correctional facility officers to be barred from the assault due to their emotional attachment to the rebellion, not only did they actively participate (against the governor's orders), but everyone involved in the invasion -- state troopers and prison officials alike -- was unrestricted in their use of shotguns.

These guns were loaded with 00-buckshot which spread at distances of 30 feet or more, striking "targets" indiscriminately. After the rebellion was quelled, reprisals against the prisoners took

place just as indiscriminately.

Some of the most controversial findings of the commission centered around the role Gov. Nelson Rockefeller played.

At the time of the uprising, said the report, the governor realized that the prison system had long been neglected, was in need of major reform and he had already accepted the legitimacy of many of the inmates' grievances.

Yet, placing in perspective Gov. Rockefeller's stubborn refusal to go to the prison, the commission said such neglect became a major contributing factor to the uprising.

The governor should not have committed the state's armed forces against the rebel inmates, the commission reasoned, without first appearing on the scene and satisfying himself that there was no other alternative and that all precautions against excessive force would be taken.

Instead, the governor remained aloof, and aside from a telephone call to President Nixon, called the shots from afar. It appears from available evidence that Gov. Rocke-

efeller's major concern during the Attica rebellion was not to prevent the loss of lives, but rather to prevent Attica from becoming a precedent-setting event for inmates in other prisons in the U.S.

Gov. Rockefeller himself even confessed, "I was trying to do the best I could to save the hostages, save the prisoners and restore the order and preserve our system without undertaking actions which could set a precedent which would go across the country like wild fire."

That system which Gov. Rockefeller was trying so hard to preserve -- the American penal system -- claims to be the only viable method of handling such "criminals" through incarceration and accompanying rehabilitation. It is in the name of rehabilitation that the inmates' demands are denied, the criminals tried and the system maintained.

Yet in the case of Attica, America's bloodiest prison rebellion to date, the commission could only conclude that "if anyone was rehabilitated, it was in spite of Attica, not because of it."



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