

The Awesome Attica Tragedy

The statement below was presented at a news conference at the Metropolitan Applied Research Center, Inc., in New York City, September 24, 1971. On behalf of the 15 co-signers, Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, read the statement to the news media. With him at the press table were Haywood Burns, executive director, National Conference of Black Lawyers; Jewell Handy Gresham, Coalition of Concerned Black Americans; Roy Innis, national director, Congress of Racial Equality; Vernon Jordan, executive director, United Negro College Fund and executive director-elect, National Urban League; and Eleanor Holmes Norton, commissioner, New York City Commission on Human Rights.

Other signers included Kenneth B. Clark, president of MARC; James W. Cobb, president, National Bar Association; Jack Greenberg, director, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.; Dorothy Height, president, National Council of Negro Women; C. Eric Lincoln, president, Back Academy of Arts and Letters; Lillian Roberts, associate director, District Council 37, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; Bayard Rustin, director, A. Philip Randolph Institute; Harold R. Sims, acting executive director, National Urban League; and Emerson C. Walden, president, National Medical Association.

TO us who have long fought for equal justice in America, Attica has become a tragic symbol of the great distance we still have to go. For us, Attica is more than an awesome tragedy in which prison personnel and inmates alike were sacrificed. For us, Attica is a watershed in the history of American criminal justice. Either it will produce wholesale reform of the administration of justice or its tragic effects will be compounded in the nation's inaction.

We feel compelled to speak out against the tragic

mistakes made at Attica lest they ever be tolerated again. And we are pledged to give continuing voice to the demands for minimal decency granted the Attica inmates before the siege and to see that other reforms are undertaken immediately by the State Department of Corrections.

We deplore the Governor's failure as Chief Executive of the State to go to Attica, take personal command, and lend the prestige of his office to the effort to avert tragedy.

We deplore the hasty, blanket endorsement by

the President of the United States of the wholesale use of indiscriminate force—an endorsement given repeatedly in the face of facts which cry out for denunciation.

We deplore the undisciplined use of deadly force by State officers that led to the deaths of correction personnel and inmates.

We deplore the irresponsibility of the State's initial sensationalistic response following the attack: the false and premature information given the public that the hostages had died brutal deaths at the hands of the inmates when police bullets actually had killed them, and the use of unnamed "outside forces" as scapegoats for the tragedy.

We deplore the State's ineptness and insensitivity in the aftermath of the siege, especially the lack of information available to the families of dead, injured and other inmates and the slow access given prisoners to medical and legal personnel.

We do not underestimate but, indeed, are sympathetic with the difficulty of the decisions Governor Rockefeller and other state officials faced in those trying days. At no time was the way out of the tragedy clear. But the failure of the Governor to come to the scene and the wholesale use of firearms to retake the prison make abundantly clear that all efforts were not exhausted to preserve human lives.

We cannot believe the way to reform of the nation's penal system lies in prison insurrection, taking of hostages, or other violence. It is perhaps the greatest indictment of our present penal system that those in power only seem prepared to recognize that problems do exist when confronted with the immediate challenge of prison insurrection. As a society, we should not require such warnings before undertaking those steps necessary to protect the life, dignity and humanity of those whom we have placed behind bars.

ONLY long-range steps to eliminate racism and poverty, steps we have long fought for, can alter the rate of crime and the dis-

proportionate number of minority group youth that go to Attica and other prisons. But in the name of decency some immediate steps are required to be taken by the Governor and the Department of Corrections, including these:

- (1) As a first step toward prison reform, immediately follow through on promises for institutional reform made by Commissioner Oswald to the Attica inmates by implementing such inmate proposals as "Provide adequate food, water, and shelter to all inmates," and "Allow true religious freedom."
- (2) Initiate an immediate investigation of prisoner treatment at all state institutions with a view to isolating reforms that can be instituted immediately.
- (3) Establish a grievance machinery for prisoner complaints at each institution, a step toward avoiding violent rebellion as a means of airing grievances.
- (4) Inform the family of each inmate at Attica and the public of his physical condition.
- (5) Especially during this period, allow an expanded schedule of visits to Attica inmates by relatives, and medical and legal personnel, including professionals independent of the Department of Corrections.
- (6) Initiate immediate training programs for all prison personnel, including the use of volunteers from the communities from which so many inmates come, so that guards and other prison personnel will not be victimized by a prison system that inadequately prepares them to deal with inmates.
- (7) Immediately initiate an affirmative recruitment program to integrate the work force of the state prison system in order to end the disparity between an 85 per cent minority group prison population and an almost totally white prison personnel force.