



A Time to Die: The Attica Prison Revolt

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A Time To Die compels us to understand the inhumanity of prisons in America, one of the greatest injustices of our time, and of a state that has no compunction about murdering prisoners and jailers alike. Think Attica forty years ago, think Pelican Bay today. Then act."—Michael Ratner, president, Center for Constitutional Rights

"[*A Time to Die*'s] lessons about the racist underpinnings of mass incarceration, about the cynical politics that determine life-or-death decisions, and about the conditions that deny prisoners their basic humanity—are as relevant today as when it was first published."—Liliana Segura, associate editor, *The Nation*

In September 1971 the inmates of Attica prison revolted, took hostages, and forced the authorities into four days of desperate negotiation. At the outset the rebels demanded—and were granted—the presence of a group of observers to act as unofficial mediators. Tom Wicker, then the associate editor of *The New York Times*, was one of those summoned. In four crucial days, he learned more, saw more, and felt more than in most of the rest of his life. In the end, a police attack was launched, and as a result dozens of prisoners, as well as prison employees, were killed.

Tom Wicker, a former reporter, Washington bureau chief, and columnist for *The New York Times*, is the author of several books, including *On the Record*. He lives in Rochester, Vermont.

A Time to Die: The Attica Prison Revolt Details

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Laura says

A fascinating, and heartbreaking, account of the rebellion at Attica in 1971, as told by Tom Wicker, a member of the observer's committee. Wicker was then a journalist with the New York Times, and by no means a radical, so it's fascinating to watch his own personal transformations.

Wicker has a unique perspective in this story, as not an inmate or a guard, but an observer. I might have disagreed with some of his political conclusions, but his observations are crucial to understanding what happened at Attica and why.

Mike Bloom says

Definitive account of the 1971 Attica prison takeover.

Andrew Ssempala says

A story too terrific to fathom, it is amazing how such a thing could happen in a land like America. Thanx to Tom Wicker for his wonderful hour by hoour coverage. This was one of the books that helped me go through the long vacation afetr A-Level.

Daniel Burton-Rose says

The most vivid and comprehensive participant account of the uprising. Occasionally Wicker's probing of his white liberal conscience gets in the way, but I also think it has it's place.

Mary JL says

Tom Wicker, the author, was one of a group of observers who were caught up in the Attica,New York, prison riot.

Althought this book is 30 years old, it is still timely. Unfortunately, the problems that sparked the Attica prison revolt are still present today--little progress has been made in the past 30-plus years.

Wicker gives a lot of inofmration on many aspects of prisons. He and a group of observers were thrust in the middle to try and arrange a compromise between striking inmates and the correctional system. He mentions that the very first time he entered the prison yard, he saw all the guns and preparations and felt that their attempts at compromise would be futilte. With so many guns, he felt, sooner or later, they would be used. And they were, with a loss of life to both inmates and correctional officers.

Wicker points out the usual prison problems--overcrowding; idleness; arbitrary rules; lack of an appeals process for inmates and so on. I mean talk about dirty crooks--at that time in Attica prisoners were allowed one shower a week!

Wicker does not deny the crimes or backgrounds of those he met. But he does reflect on whether our current system is effective. An example (using prices in the 1970's but the idea is the same)--one inmate got four years for cashing bogus money orders totaling \$124.60. At that time, it cost the state of New York \$8,000 per year, per inmate. So \$124.60 vs \$32,000? What is wrong with this picture.

Of course, some persons ARE too dangerous to be loose, and this fact is admitted. But in some cases, prison can be overused.

A fascinating slice of history, regardless of one's feelings about prison reform. Recommended for fans of history, politics, law and criminal justice studies.

In ending, some person often will say that well known phrase, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime".

To this I wish to make three points 1) since we can't build enough prisons to hold everyone--we're trying--most prisoners eventually are released. If they come out less hardened and embittered, it would be better for society as a whole. 2) the measure of a society is how the poor and powerless are treated--the rich and powerful manage quite well in almost every society and finally 3) even if you hate and despise criminals, your tax dollars are paying for the current system. Maybe changing some aspects of how we run prison would be cheaper in the long run.

Susanna Sturgis says

An editor and proofreader by trade, I was recently lucky enough to proofread Heather Ann Thompson's forthcoming *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Aftermath*, due in late August from Pantheon Books. In 1971 I was a student antiwar activist. Attica was one of the series of horrors that marked my young adulthood, from the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy through the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, My Lai, the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, killings at Kent State and Jackson State, Watergate . . . But whatever details I'd registered at the time had pretty much vanished before I proofread Thompson's excellent and desperately important book.

From *Blood in the Water* I learned that Tom Wicker, a *New York Times* journalist I'd regularly read and admired "back in the day," had been one of the citizen observers present during the four-day "uprising" at the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York. He'd written a book about his experience there: *A Time to Die*, published in 1975. Thanks to the inter-library loan system in my state, Massachusetts, I managed to find a copy.

A Time to Die is so moving and so timely I wish it were more readily available. (Update: I just learned that Haymarket Books in Chicago published a new edition of the book in 2011, so it's more readily available than I thought.)

The book is both a detailed account of the unfolding of events at Attica from September 9 through 13, 1971, and a memoir of Wicker's own odyssey as a white man from segregated small-town North Carolina to a crucible where race mattered in a very big way. The citizen observers at Attica were black, white, and Puerto Rican, elected officials and journalists and grassroots activists. Every passing hour asked Wicker and the others "Which side are you on?" Facile answers were not possible. One of the many excruciating strengths of

this book is that Wicker never lets himself or the reader off the hook.

A Time to Die hints at the official whitewash of the horrific events of September 13, when the overarmed, undertrained New York State Police and Attica correction officers -- all of whom were white -- were turned loose on mostly black and Puerto Rican prisoners whose "weapons," if they had any, were strictly homemade. These events come at about the midpoint of Thompson's book. *Blood in the Water* traces the court cases that followed the uprising, those on behalf of the prisoners who were grievously wounded in the retaking of the prison and tortured by guards when the shooting was done and those on behalf of the hostage correction officers who were killed or wounded -- not by prisoners but by the trigger-happy law-enforcement officers sent in to retake the prison. The last of those cases was not settled until well into the first decade of the current century.

While reading both Wicker's book and Thompson's, I had a hard time believing that the key event took place 45 years ago. It could have happened last year; it could be happening now. I raged at the callousness, cowardice, and dishonesty of people who've been dead for 10 or 20 or 25 years. At the same time I was awed by the courage and perseverance of others, from the medical examiner who refused to be intimidated to the prosecutor who blew the whistle on the state's refusal to indict any law-enforcement officials for crimes committed during the retaking, to the lawyer who anchored the Attica brothers' defense for decades -- and who died last year, before Thompson's book made it into print.

Reading *A Time to Die*, I was also very struck by something that probably went largely unnoticed at the time: all, and I mean *all*, of the players were men. No surprise about the prisoners, of course: this was a men's prison, after all. But all of the prison administrators, all of the law-enforcement officers, everyone in Governor Nelson Rockefeller's office, all of the lawyers and judges, and even all of the citizen observers were men, and apart from the citizen observers virtually all of them were white. In the decades-long fight for justice that followed, however, women and people of color played key roles. May we be inspired by their example.

Adam Watson says

Over the course of a few moves in my early twenties, I "inherited" this book from my parents. (It's the original hardback from the 70's.) I read it for the first time in the 1990's, and it still haunts me. Wicker not only brings a specific event alive (one of the best non-fics I've ever read), but discusses racism in an unvarnished way, even honest enough to reflect on his own hypocrisy. The statistics Wicker gives may be 30 years old, but I dare you to read this and still believe that the traditional American prison system works. Highly recommended.

Michael says

Maybe my expectations were too high or something, but this book seemed very long and boring to me. It never really grabbed me. Most of the book is about the author's experience as one of the "observers". Not much detail about what was going on in the prison as far as the inmates are concerned. I felt like a lot of the book was rehashing the same thing over and over. "The inmates want this....the inmates can't have that....but they want this....but they can't have that....but they still want this....but they still can't have that". That is how this book read to me. The beginning was ok, the end was ok, but otherwise I was just bored. Of course that's just my opinion. Obviously a lot of other people found the book quite intriguing, but I did not.

Jim says

I can clearly remember the Attica Prison and the day Gov. Nelson Rockefeller sent in troops to retake the Yard at a great loss of life. NY Times author Tom Wicker tells the story, with the skill of a great reporter and the sympathy of human touched by the events.

David Palen says

About 100 pages too long but it served its purpose of making me understand what happened at Attica 40 years ago. The themes ring through in today's world as much as yesteryear's world, which should be alarming.

Dan Sharber says

there is a time when a few people get to truly see behind the curtain. there are events and episodes that lay bare the intense inequity and utter disregard for humanity that is at the heart of our capitalist system. stenibeck lays this bare in grapes of wrath and tom wicker does the same in this book. prisons in our country are a strange nexus of the ills of our capitalist system. it is why they are so hidden yet at the some time so prominent in our thinking of society and 'crime'. wicker struggles with what he could/should have done differently but in a lot of ways it was all preordained. the uprising, retaking of the prison, and the bloody, violent reprisals were all to be expected. the 'institutions' wielded their power and acted in totally expected ways. the unexpected part only comes in the fact that we are told to believe that things happen differently. this is what wicker struggles with too and what we all do when confronted with the fact that reality does not match rhetoric. wicker learned that prison communities are embroiled in a toxic stew of racism and tenuous employment within an industry clearing designed to dehumanize and destroy humanity rather than play any rehabilitative role. but we are taught that prisons are a necessary evil and that basically well meaning people try to do a good job. but as wicker found out, when looking behind the curtain, that our system is designed to warehouse and waste humanity and the twins evils of capitalism and racism both lead to a fully encouraged situation where prisoners are massacred. wicker stood face to face with these evils but could go no further than seeing a human failure. and while the problems were and are systemic the human failure is there. but that failure occurred before the attica uprising. it occurs everyday in what GI paris refers to as 'the conditions.' it is all about the conditions - the system - within which people behave in completely predictable ways. this is our human failure. this is what must be rectified to prevent an ever continuing cycle of pain, degradation and exploitation. this book and the events they describe are regrettable not just because the loss of life but because they could've been avoided.

Erik Surewaard says

Although this book had a very interesting story to tell, it is very repetitive. This made the book dull to read in some parts.

It would have also been better, if the author had made an appendix with a list of all persons involved and

their function in daily live. The story introduced so many people, making it difficult to understand. This made the book especially challenging in the first few chapters.

In a story about the biggest prison revolt ever the USA, I found it also strange that the author included his own biography. Okay... there is no problem with including a short background of himself, but many pages were dedicated (several times) to the authors youth, jobs, ...

It astonished me also that the author was writing the book by writing it as if from a third-person. So instead of "I was...", the story was told as "Wicker was...". And this whilst the author is Tom Wicker himself. Of all the books I have read, this was the first time I ever experienced this. With the large amount of people in the book, it would at least be somewhat easier if he himself would have used the first-person.

This book could have been a lot better in case it would have been reduced to 60 to 70 percent of its current length. By removing the repetitive parts, this would have been easily achievable. Instead of putting the shoot-out in the last 30 pages, and putting it in the first part of the book, I think the book would also be a better read. I was constantly waiting for the real action, and was dissapointed it was described only in the end in so few pages.

I would agree in stating I am quite negative on this book. The events and its importance, still warrant this book a three star score. I don't know whether there are alternative reads on the Attica revolt, but I would recommend to look for an alternative book/writer.

Cindy says

I read this book in the 90's. It was informative and interesting. Told the story of the Attica Prison riot. The author was involved in it due to becoming one of the mediators. A history book for the Attica State Prison in New York.

Art says

Tom Wicker, one of the outsiders brought in to try to negotiate an end to the Attica Prison uprising, writes a touching account of what it feels like to be helpless while actions move forward to the inevitable deaths of hostage guards. As a young reporter, I covered all of the trials resulting from the riot. So there were lots of familiar faces and stories in this book. But there are also the stories behind the scenes as Wicker and others try to negotiate a peaceful settlement and save the guard's lives.

Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says

Tom Wicker was a journalist. During the Attica prison riot he was an observer. It is this experience that enabled him put this book together. Attica prison is situated in New York. The then governor for that State was Nelson Rockefeller. The prisoners had taken hostage some of the guards. They believed that this gave them the power they needed to plead for their case. They wanted changes in prison.

The prisoners were complaining of harsh treatment in the prison system. They wanted better. They wanted to be treated like human beings and not animals. Prison sentences were so harsh to the point that some of them

did not want their family members to visit them. Homosexuality among prisoners was another problem which the authorities were turning a blind eye. Murders were also happening in prison. Overcrowding was another issue. Torture, both physical and mental by the guards. They wanted an overhaul of the system.

Tom Wicker's views are also very important. He has outlined some of the failures of imprisonment as a form of punishment. He advocates for more non-custodial sentences. And, when somebody has to be incarcerated, he suggests that it should be only for a short period of time. Prison does not rehabilitate, in fact, the longer the sentences the higher the chances of prisoners repeating the offences. What the society needs, he says is more education, more training, and hospitalization.
