Interview with **Tom Wicker**
Date: October 18, 1988
Interviewer:
Camera Rolls: 2001-1004
Sound Rolls: 201-202
Team: B

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2001]
[sound roll #201]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

This is Team B, two, oh, oh, one, camera roll, sound roll two, oh, one.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, Tom—

Camera crew member #2:

Just a sec. OK, sounds good [inaudible]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, Tom. So, like, let me just see if you can take us back to where you were and what you were doing when you got that call about coming to Attica.

00:00:34:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I was living and working in Washington in those days, the Washington bureau of The Times. And I had been to—I was aware of the Attica revolt because I'd seen a story on the front page of The Times that morning but I didn't really pay much attention. And I had been to a kind of a plush luncheon of a small group that I had frequently lunched with at that time in the office of the *National Geographic* magazine. And so, while I was there, I was called away to the telephone and told that there was a message asking me if I would come to Attica. I didn't know much of what that was all about. It was a sharp contrast of course, to the, these surroundings that I was in. So, I went back to my office on K Street in Washington at that time and got more information about it, and left that afternoon, went to Attica. I didn't even go home to change my shirt or anything because I was under the impression I'd just go up there for a few hours and come back. I didn't realize [laughs] it was gonna be a long weekend.

00:01:28:00

Interviewer:

When you got there, you were met by an officer and they drove you to the—to, to, to the penitentiary and you met with the other observers. What was it like when you first went into the yard, when you walked down that A Yard, the A Block into A Yard and then into the D Yard? Just sort of give me a picture or something, what it felt like.

00:01:47:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I didn't go into the yard where the inmates were right away. When I first arrived at Attica, it was kind of overwhelming. I had, had not at that time, been into a prison since, oh, many years back in North Carolina. I used to be the editor of a little magazine put out by the State Board of Public Welfare and we had it printed in the prison print shop. So, I'd have to go out there, there once a month and—but I hadn't been in the prison since then and anyone who has been into one of those places, particularly one that's as typically a, a big house, you know, as Attica, which is really an overwhelming sort of place with monstrous walls and everything, anyone who's been into one of those places knows how terrible it is. I mean, you feel oppressed right away. I mean, oppressed in the emotional sense, not the political sense. And so, and in that particular instance, it was full of state troopers, you know, and sheriff's deputies, and guards, and guns, and, I mean, it was really a warlike atmosphere around there. And so, I went on and was shown into this little room where the, where the observers were meeting. And we met there and talked back and forth for, as I recall it now, a couple or three hours before I went into the yard with the inmates. So, I had sort of become acclimatized to the whole atmosphere a little bit before going in there. But it also meant that we went in first or I went in first at night, a group of us went in. And that was unquestionably an eerie experience because we crossed some of the ground inside the prison where they had been

rioting the day before, you know, and it was all smashed and littered and we could tell that. And then we went through this little short passageway into the A Yard. I suppose we should say that there are four separate yards in that prison. Went through this little passageway into the A Yard and I, I remember it as if it were yesterday, coming out into the actual yard where the inmates were and there was this vast crowd, is my recollection, is of thirteen to fifteen hundred people in there, in an area about the size of two football fields. And there's this enormous crowd of inmates gathered there but in front of them and between them, between this crowd and, and our group of observers, there were a line of inmates who formed a human chain. That is, one facing this way and one facing that way and they had their arms linked together, a very strong chain that, I suppose, would have protected us if anyone had threatened us, which no one did but—and then there were—the light was, you know, a few dim electric bulbs from up in the walls but there were trash cans with fires burning in them, and so, it was a very eerie flickering light, you know. So, it wasn't entirely a, a, a—you wouldn't choose that experience for your ordinary weekend, I don't think. But on the other hand, I felt, after that first initial feeling of being out of reach of what normally I thought of as the law, you know, the sort of protection that every citizen takes for granted until you don't have it, once I was past that shock, I felt relatively secure. I never felt particularly threatened in there in any sense. The, the whole situation obviously was precarious somewhat. You didn't know exactly what might happen or who might get out of hand but I never felt that any minute now, you know, somebody was gonna throttle me, or drag me off to be chained, or anything of that sort.

00:05:13:00

Interviewer:

What did you—what, what was your sense of the inmates, of the inmates in terms of the general body and then the leaders themselves, like Herb Blyden?

00:05:21:00

Tom Wicker:

Yes, well, of course, our group dealt a good deal more with the leaders than with the general body of the inmates, and particularly on that first venture into the yard. It was at night, so we couldn't see too much of the, of the, of the group out there. But I found the, the inmate leaders to be at that point, to be rather impressive. They were obviously quite a, quite strongly in control of the crowd, that was the first thing that impressed me. Secondly, they were wonderful orators, I mean [laughs] they really could turn on the, the oratory, you know, and fire up that crowd there. And, and, in some ways, they made a lot of sense, other ways, otherwise, it was passion, you know. And then when we got down to it, really talking about the, the instant issues, you know, the problems that the inmates wanted dealt [car horn] with and how they felt about their life there in the prison.
And so, they, they were quite businesslike, too. It was always true, of course, that they wanted more than they were ever likely to get, we understood that. And the main thing, the main issue, the issue that hung us up from beginning to end and never was resolved was that

they wanted amnesty. And I'm not, at this late stage of the game, even yet prepared to pass judgment on whether that was a fair question or not, but what was clear to me from the start was that they weren't gonna get it. And so, [car horn] what seemed to me to be necessary was, in my typical moderate intermediary position, what seemed to me to be necessary was that we should work something out that the inmates could accept as amnest-amnesty that the state didn't have to say was amnesty. And of course, that, that proved to be a futile effort.

00:07:03:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop for a second?

Camera crew member #2:

Sure.

Interviewer:

When you—

[cut]

00:07:07:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK. Slate, please.

[slate]

00:07:11:00

Interviewer:

I want you to go to sort of give me again the picture. This time, just from when you went into the yard again the first time, not so much when you got to Attica but when you went into the yard and what the experience was like.

00:07:22:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, we were met by a sort of like a committee of inmates who had dressed in outlandish costumes, in many cases football helmets, you know, and some had hoods over their faces and so—and that gave the whole thing a, a kind of a strange feeling. And then ***we were led***

down a long corridor which had been trashed and burned out in the initial rioting. And across part of another yard and through a little short passage into the A Yard where the, where the, where the inmates were gathered in an immense crowd. I think, probably about fifteen hundred of them is my recollection, in a space about the size of two football fields, entirely surrounded by either brick walls or, or these buildings that were cell blocks for the inmates. So, it was an enclosed area and very poorly lit with a few electric bulbs on the walls around there, and some fires burning in, in gasoline, in trash cans giving a very scary orange flickering sort of light over the whole thing. And the first thing we saw was this human chain of inmates, one facing this way, and one facing that way, and with their arms locked. And they stood between us and formed a sort of a, they formed sort of a path up to the front where a table had been set up. And all of the, the big crowd of the inmates were behind that chain. And I suppose had anyone tried to surge forward to capture us or [laughs] something, the chain would have, would have protected us, that was clearly its design. And—but once, ***I mean, the first feeling of shock, I think, for a sort of a sedentary middle-class person like me, was the feeling of being out of reach of the law that one ordinarily thinks protects you, you know, that sort of protection we all take for granted until you don't have it. And all of a sudden, I realized that there wasn't anything in there to protect me except these other inmates whom, these inmates whom it's all too easy to think of, you know, as murderers, murderers and thieves and so forth. And, and that, that is a somewhat scary feeling, there's no question. But very shortly, very shortly after that, we all got down to business of trying to, you know, work out the problems there. The inmate leaders got into some very fervent oratory, they were great orators.*** And it was clear to me that the—after a very short time, that the crowd out, the great unseen crowd out there, they were not just dying to come forward and string me up, you know [laughs]. They, they were quite docile in the hands of the leaders. So, it settled down very quickly. And I found the leaders there very businesslike. They wanted to get on with it and their, their demands were obviously going to be very hard to satisfy but they made them in a very businesslike manner.

00:10:21:00

Camera crew member #2:

We have to change [inaudible].

[cut]

[camera roll #2002]

00:10:24:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, this is two, oh, oh, two, sound roll two, oh, one.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

And hold. Sounds ready.

00:10:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. Just once again, I want to sort of mine this area a little. The issue of amnesty seemed to be the major thing between the inmates and the state. What did you think about the inmates wanting complete amnesty?

00:10:48:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I had—the issue of amnesty, obviously, was the thing that hung up the negotiation from beginning to end and on which they ultimately failed. To this day, it's difficult for me to, to say that one side or the other was, was absolutely right about that. I mean, there was a mixture here. The inmates had good reason to know, there had been other prison riots and some of them had been in them at Auburn and places like that. They had good reason to believe that the state wouldn't play fairly with them. They had, they had seen inmates prosecuted, you know, for things like the theft of an officer's keys and that sort of stuff. And they felt that they had real grievances as to how they had been treated in that prison at Attica, the kind of conditions that they underwent there. And that in that sense, their revolt was justified, and that since their revolt was justified, whatever incidents might have occurred along the way ought to be forgiven them. Well, that's an argument that was made very powerfully [car horn] and strongly. And yet, clearly, from the state's point of view, you can see they said, Well, you know, you, you may have felt justified but a lot of people feel justified when they break the law, they break the law nonetheless. And therefore, as Governor Rockefeller said very strongly that, you know, There's no provision by which I can grant amnesty, and so forth. Now, I don't really take that at full course either because political figures like Rockefeller find lots of ways to do things when they wanna do it. But nonetheless, it was a, it was not a clear-cut argument one way or the other. And the inmates felt very strongly that they had to have amnesty and that was particularly true after the death of the guard William Quinn, I believe was his name, who was killed. He was injured in the first moment of rioting and then died, like, two days later. After his death became known in the yard, then the, the, the calls for amnesty grew even stronger because it was feared that there was a murder charge waiting for somebody out there, you see. And that also, I think it's fair to say, made it more difficult for the state even to think in terms of amnesty because there was a murder charge possible against somebody. So, it was [clears throat], it was virtually an insoluble issue. And what I hoped as, as an interme—as a mediator there, I hoped that we could do what is so often done in political controversies, that we could work out some formula that the inmates could accept as granting amnesty but which the state would not have to say was amnesty. And that was the search we embarked upon and ultimately failed.

00:13:19:00

Interviewer:

Quinn had died, tensions had risen. Talk about why you decided to call Rockefeller.

00:13:30:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, we called Rockefeller on Sunday afternoon from the prison and the riot had been going on since Thursday. I myself had been involved since Friday. And I think we all felt, the observers' group, we all felt that the moment had come when the decisive step had—was going to be taken one way or the other and indeed we were right. It happened, I'm pretty sure we know in retrospect that state officials had decided to retake the prison by force on Sunday afternoon, and our call to Governor Rockefeller staved that off until Monday morning. Not any great gain but it, it shows that our sense of it was right, that that was the moment, if somebody was gonna do something, it would have to be done. We all felt, we used the word to the governor, that if, if the prison was retaken by force, there would be a massacre. It, as it turned out, there was a massacre. We were somewhat wrong. I think the observers all felt that the—and it's a commentary on us—we felt that the inmates would kill the hostages if they were threatened that way. They, in fact, didn't do it, as you know.

00:14:34:00

Interviewer:

Let me, let me ask you that again and it would be good if you didn't say there was, there was a massacre. If you could just—

Tom Wicker:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—sort of relate what happened when you decided to call Rockefeller.

Camera crew member #2:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer:

OK.

00:14:45:00

Interviewer:

So, so, why did, why did you decide to call Rockefeller? What was, what was—

00:14:48:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, because ***we thought that the, the, the situation had reached crisis, that in fact, there was about to be an attempt to retake the prison. We thought that there would be a lot of bloodshed. In fact, we said to the governor that if that happened, there would be a massacre. And his response was that basically, that he sympathized with our position. He felt that everything had been done that could be done. He was very—if you, anyone who remembers Governor Rockefeller will remember his effusive manner. And he was very—he thanked us greatly for our efforts and that sort of thing but the net effect of it was that, that he felt everything had been done that could be done. He could not grant amnesty and in fact, said that, "Even if I could, I wouldn't do it."*** And he felt that he should not come to Attica, which was the request we had made of him, the, the specific request, he thought that that wouldn't do any good. I still think that it would have. I never thought that Governor Rockefeller should come up there and involve himself with the inmates in the same way that we observers had. But I did think that if he came there and talked to his own officials, to the prison officials, maybe met with a committee of the inmates outside A Yard and so forth, something like that, that his presence, his show of interest could have helped break the deadlock. I still think that, I still think that. Of course, it's a, it's one of those things that one will never know because it didn't happen.

00:16:08:00

Interviewer:

That was D Yard that the inmates were in.

00:16:10:00

Tom Wicker:

D Yard, yes.

00:16:13:00

Interviewer:

Hmm. I want you to sort of, once again, kind of paint a picture for me of the last time you went into D Yard, you know, with—

Tom Wicker:

The last time.

Interviewer:

—yeah.

Tom Wicker:

Yes.

Interviewer:

What was it What was it like? What was, what was, what was going on among [car horn] the inmates?

00:16:26:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I think by then, everyone felt a sense of the futility of what we had been doing—

00:16:30:00

Interviewer:

Can you stop for a second? Could you include, The last time I went to the—

Tom Wicker:

Yes. Well, the last time we went in...

Camera crew member #2:

Stop, stop.

Tom Wicker:

I'm sorry.

Camera crew member #2:

Yeah, did you cut?

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #2:

Yeah, OK.

00:16:37:00

Tom Wicker:

The last time we went into the prison yard was on [car horn] Sunday afternoon. And I think by then, everyone was feeling a sense of futility, there was an almost a, almost a funereal sense in a way. Because we observers felt—I know I did and I think most of my colleagues did—we felt that very shortly, perhaps right away, as it turned out, it was the next morning, that the prison would be taken, retaken forcibly. We felt that a lot of people were going to die if that happened. The inmates, I think since, in retrospect, my feeling is that they didn't expect so much to die because it's a peculiar thing but prison inmates are not used to seeing guards and so forth with guns, because they don't take guns into the prison. They see them with clubs and that sort of thing. And I, I think they really didn't anticipate what in fact was going to happen, or at least they didn't anticipate the, the magnitude of it and the ferocity of it. But nonetheless, this strange inmate society that had formed in the D Yard, and the relationship that had formed between our observer group and that society, and the kind of limited freedom that they had had—which at one time, had made them very ebullient about the whole thing, but which I think was beginning to wear off at that point [car horn] we all felt that that was coming to an end. That this strange, [car horn] fearful moment was about over with, and in one way or another, well, however it might turn out. And I, I definitely had that feeling and the, and the oratory of the inmates suggested that they had that feeling. There was a, a kind of a final sense about the whole thing and it was really quite sad. And you—as, as you recall, I interviewed for a TV camera that was in the yard there, I interviewed some of the inmates—some of the hostages. And that is an experience that, of course, I mean, that's, that's—haunts me to this day because 10 of those men were dead the next day, you know, and they were all, in effect, pleading for help. And they were pleading to the governor, they were pleading to me, they were pleading to everyone and, and there was no help. So, that was not a moment that one recalls with any great satisfaction. I mean, you kinda—

00:18:56:00

Interviewer:

What were, what were, what were your feelings when you walked out of the yard that last time?

00:19:01:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I've, I, I had the feeling that I had, that a lot of people I had come to know, and had had some sort of strong emotional relationship with in two days in a situation that very few other people had ever been placed in, a, a, a, a—just a kind of a closeness that had developed not because—it never would have developed between me and any of those people outside of that prison because we wouldn't have come together but it had developed. And I felt that that was, that was coming to an end, men that I had come to know were [car horn] going to die and die needlessly. And I felt needlessly then and needest-needlessly now. All these years later, I feel even more strongly that it was needless. It need not have happened.

00:19:44:00

Interviewer:

I'd like to ask you that question again and if you could just include, The last time I left the—when I left the yard for the last time.

Tom Wicker:

Well, I can't say what I just said again very well, but when I left the yard for the last time—

Interviewer:

No, that's all right, that's all right.

00:19:57:00

Tom Wicker:

You know [car horn] it's—I, I had a very strong feeling that men with whom I had, in a very strange and odd way, developed a relationship with, a relationship I never would have had before, never have had since, that these men, you know, were—that they were going to die. There was no doubt in my mind that they were going to die.

00:20:19:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop a second?

Camera crew member #2:

Sure.

Interviewer:

Thank you.

[cut]

[camera roll #2003]

00:20:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, this is two, oh, oh, three.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

OK, Sam.

00:20:31:00

Interviewer:

The next morning, the 13th, it's [car horn] the day of the assault. You were in the stewards' room with the other observers.

Tom Wicker:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

And it took less than ten minutes. I mean, what were you feeling emotionally and what was—what did you hear going on outside?

00:20:48:00

Tom Wicker:

We really couldn't, on the last morning of—when the assault took place on Monday morning, September the 13th, I was in the stewards' room with the, with the other observers. Some had not been let back in and were out in the parking lot but some of us were inside and we were aware of what was happening. In the first place, we were told that the assault was going in. Secondly, we could see the helicopter going over. They even used the air power, you know,

to drop gas on these poor guys. And some of the gas seeped into the room where we were—that, it makes your eyes tear a little bit. And we could see a lot of activity and notice but in fact, we couldn't hear anything. I, I don't think I heard anything that I would have thought was gunfire, pretty sure I didn't. Although there were, as the State Police film shows, there were six minutes of indiscriminate gunfire, six minutes of firing into fifteen hundred men [car horn] in an enclosed space about the size of two football fields, who were holding, as I recall it, twenty or thirty hostages. Six minutes of, I repeat indiscriminate gunfire, that I think are as shameful a six minutes as I know of in American history because you're bound to kill people. Indiscriminate gunfire kills indiscriminately. You're bound to kill people and not just inmates who, in some twisted way, you might think deserve to be killed, but you were going to kill hostages and they did kill hostages.

00:22:18:00

Interviewer:

What was going on inside your head right at that moment?

00:22:21:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, of course, I didn't know who was being killed or anything. And we, we observers to our, I suppose our shame in the way we all believed, or I, I don't know of any exceptions. We all believed that the inmates would, in fact, kill the hostages as they had threatened to do. And they had posted them in such a way that it looked as if they were going to do it. So, we had no more faith in the inmates than the state did. We thought they were gonna kill them. And it was a, it was a terrible time because there we were, cooped up in our room, the gas was coming in the windows. Not was not for us but, you know, we knew it was being used. And even though, at least I couldn't hear the gunfire, we knew it was going on, and ***we had predicted the day before that it was going to be a massacre.*** People were weeping openly and not just from the gas. And it's, it's the title of my book, you know, ***Herman Badillo turned to me and said***—I didn't make it up—he turned to me and said, ***"I don't know what the hurry was." He said, "There's always time to die." And I don't know what the hurry was either, you know, those guys weren't going anywhere. They were inside 30-foot walls. It was, it was September, it was getting cold up there. The food was running out, the sanitary conditions were bad, the place smelled awful. I mean, that sense of freedom that the guys that had to begin with, with, just before being out of their cells, that was beginning to wear away in the reality of their situation. I don't know what the hurry was. They could have waited two days, three days, four days. Those guys would have given up. They didn't have to go in and kill them all. But they did.***

00:23:58:00

Interviewer:

What are your recollection, recollections of Commissioner Oswald?

00:24:03:00

Tom Wicker:

I had, I had considerable admiration for Russell Oswald. I think that he really wanted to settle that affair without violence if it were possible. In the long run, he wasn't able to do that because he wasn't really in charge. Governor Rockefeller didn't come to Attica but he had his representatives there from his office and they, they—to do him credit—they went along with Oswald for a few days, two or three days, but ultimately, they took charge. And the political reality of the situation, I suppose, was that there were demands on the governor to—and at least, he certainly said so—to retake the institution, reopen the institution, res-restore law and order. And that was, if you'll recall, we're talking about 1971, that was in a period when law and order was probably the highest political issue in the nation. President Nixon was in the White House and he campaigned a year later on the whole issue of law and order, so—and, and Governor Rockefeller was at that time, I think it's fair to say, moving from the generally liberal position he had had in the '60s, more to the right under the political influences of the time. And so, I think Oswald, if he had been left to his own devices, would have made even longer efforts and stronger efforts to resolve the situation peacefully. Now, I wanna hasten to say that when—then that might not have been possible, I believe it—that you could have simply have waited out the inmates there. And ultimately, you would have gotten a solution in which 10 hostages didn't die and, and all the inmates that were killed, too, and 83 people wounded. I should add here out of what may be—what is lasting indignation, that you had 83 people wounded to the point of needing hospital care and as I recall it, 39 people killed and they made no effort to provide any medical care beforehand. They did later on, but they made no effort beforehand to provide for what any fool knew was going to happen. But in any case, I think if Oswald had had his way, all that would have been avoided. And, and [car horn] he, he regarded himself as a prison reformer, as a liberal on these questions. That was a long time ago, the inmates didn't regard him that way. And perhaps his liberal instincts of that time would not be so regarded now. I don't know. But, but I think that Russell Oswald was a man of good faith and good intentions who would have settled that affair peaceably if he'd been allowed to do so.

00:26:36:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can, can, can we cut?

Camera crew member #2:

Yes.

[cut]

00:26:44:00

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Sam, we're ready.

00:26:48:00

Interviewer:

This has been three days out of your life. How did this experience effect you?

00:26:56:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, it effected me very strongly in an, in an emotional sense, and possibly in an intellectual sense, not—it, it, it had no real impact on my life. I went on doing what I was doing, you know, what I had been doing, I'm still doing, as a matter of fact. So, I didn't suffer any great change of that kind. But it's, it's left me with a lasting sense of in a moment when something was really required, you know, of me and of others there, it's left me with a lasting sense of failure. Because we had an opportunity, however limited, to stop that and we didn't. And I've, I've—it's, that's something that you have to live with, you know. On the other hand, it—I think it's given me a considerably greater insight than I might have had, into the workings of, not just of government, but of power generally, you know. I, I don't mean to sound on the, in this program an apologia for the men who were in-inmates at Attica and for whatever crimes they have committed and so, some of which were heinous, I don't mean to do that at all. But nonetheless, they were, they were, they were human beings and, and they had rights and the wish to live and so forth. And we haven't, in our society yet, we haven't even remotely learned how to deal with such people, to deal with offenders in our society. How, how to, how to cope with the offenses and to help the offenders into a, a, a less offensive way of life. We haven't even begun to learn how to do that. And people who think—and you hear the cry all the time, Clap them into prison, you know. Keep them there a longer time. Death penalty. I mean, none of that is the right answer to any of this. And I think I see that more clearly than I ever did at Attica because I saw, I saw men up there who rightly, I suppose, could be called murderers, rapists, thieves, and I, and I saw that they were, you know—there, but for the grace of God, go I. And I think it's a very serious problem. We now have in this country the greatest number of people in prison that we've ever had, it's over a half million, I think. Our society imprisons the third largest number of people of any, any system in the world, any country in the world and the first two are the Soviet Union and South Africa. And that's a third place that we ought not to be very proud of. And we continue to have high rates of crime, people who are fearful of being hit over the head at night, or having their houses entered are right to be afraid of it. I mean, we have a high rate of crime in this country and we need to do something about it. But the cries for vengeance and the cries for a sort of a, of

a fundamental basic security, you know, lock everybody up, death penalty, that sort of thing. I mean, that's not doing it. Anyone who wants to take a look at the statistics and what's happened in our society over the last twenty years knows that that's not, that that's not doing it. And so, I've felt very strongly since Attica that, you know, locking people up in cages and throwing away the key is not the right way to do it.

00:29:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #2004]

[sound roll #202]

00:30:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

Two, oh, oh, four, camera. Two, oh, two, sound.

[slate]

Interviewer:

I'm going to ask you once again—you ready to go?

Camera crew member #2:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Ask you once again about the effect the experience at Attica had on you.

00:30:25:00

Tom Wicker:

Well, I can't—the experience at Attica of course, is a thing that, you know, remains with you forever, a horrendous event of that kind. I can't say that it changed my life in a material way, that is to say I didn't change my way of livelihood or anything of that sort. I'm still doing now [laughs] more or less what I did then. But it certainly affected me emotionally and, and

intellectually, perhaps even politically. I think I, I have a persisting sense of failure out of that, because we were charged with the possibility of avoiding that terrible thing that happened, the deaths of 39 people and we didn't. And it's all very well to say that, Well, you couldn't have, and maybe that's true but nonetheless, we didn't and I feel that very strongly and always have. Emotionally, I—and, well, it's hard to say whether it's emotionally or intellectually. I can't really quite look at the crime problem in this country anymore in the same way as so many people do, as literally an open-and-shut case. There are criminals and non-criminals, and criminals are bad and non-criminals are good. It's very hard for me to see that because in the—and I'm not saying that that isn't true [laughs] in some cases—but in the, in those close and dramatic and emotional circumstances of 72 hours there in the prison, I saw men in a different, different light from that. I mean, I'm not trying to say that some of them had not committed terrible crimes, I'm sure they had but I, I had an opportunity to see the, the, their humanity, you know, as perhaps they could see mine. And so, I can never again quite look at the situation as being one in which you should just say, Well, you know, lock them all up and keep them there a longer time or death penalty, or that sort of thing. Because these people are human beings, and in many cases, they, they are—I'm not trying to make some generalized case that society is to blame for their problems and all—but in many cases, there are problems of childhood deprivation, or drugs, or alcohol, or lack of education, or brutalization, or whatever, that are responsible for—that have caused people to, to offend society. And it really isn't good enough on the part of our society just to throw these people into cages and, and, and leave them there and say, Well, you know, you're a criminal. We need to see why we have so much crime in this country and we need to try to do something more about it than just revenge ourselves. And, and I, I think that's probably in any, in any sense of having to do with my work and the way I look at the world, that's probably the, the lasting effective of, of Attica on me, the most lasting effect.

00:33:01:00

Interviewer:

Bobby Seale seemed to be a sign of hope, I think, from reading your book. What was your reaction to him, when he came to the prison and what he—subsequently happened?

Tom Wicker:

Mm-hmm. Well, Seale, in 1971, was a much more prominent political figure than he is now. In fact, he's not at all prominent now, as far as I know but then—

Interviewer:

Can you start it again?

Tom Wicker:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

I don't wanna really know about him now.

Tom Wicker:

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer:

Just back then.

00:33:25:00

Tom Wicker:

Right, well, I understand when I—but you got to understand that there are people who don't even know who Bobby Seale is today. That's what, what I was trying to say. Well, when Bobby Seale came to the prison, a lot of people today might not understand the extent to which he was really a prominent figure then, and someone that the inmates looked up to, and waited for, and hoped to have from him, the kind of words and the kind of leadership that would resolve their situation. But in fact, Bobby Seale, precisely because he was a prominent figure then, he had a constituency to protect. It wouldn't have done him any good as a political figure to have come there and made a fireball speech urging these inmates to hold out to the end and get killed. It wouldn't have done him any good with his own people. And so, in effect, when he came there, he, too, became something of a voice of moderation to the inmates. I think he disappointed the inmates in that he didn't show them the way out or anything, but he couldn't. And some of our observer group who knew him, and who were more into leftist politics and so forth, also pinned great hopes on Bobby Seale. I don't make any claim to be im—prescient but I never really did very much because I, I couldn't see what he could do that we couldn't do. In fact, it seemed to me that there were a lot of things that he couldn't do that perhaps we could, and—but he at least came, and he went in there and he talked to the inmates, and he left and was coming back. He was on the way back to the prison for a second visit when he heard—I believe it was on the radio—heard the news on the attack on the prison and, and didn't come back. So, Seale made good faith, good faith efforts, there just wasn't much he could do or anyone else.

00:35:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. Good. Thank you. I think that's it.

Camera crew member #1:

Can I have a room tone?

[room tone]

Interviewer:

I think that, I think that'll, that'll do it.

Tom Wicker:

OK, good.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:35:24:00