

IN THE NATION
Tom Wicker

Why Not Glasnost?

Last May 12, John C. Whitehead, the Deputy Secretary of State, wrote to Adrian W. DeWind, the chairman of Americas Watch, to say that four Cuban penal experts would not be granted visas to visit a number of prisons in the United States.

Mr. Whitehead cited the Immigration and Nationality Act and a Presidential proclamation of 1985, both of which make Cuban Government officials ineligible to enter the U.S. But he went on to add what was clearly his prime concern:

"I continue to believe that the Cuban Government would merely use such a visit to deflect attention from its own abysmal human rights situation by converting the treatment of prisoners into a bilateral problem."

Mr. Whitehead did not mention the fact, since Mr. DeWind knew it, that the Cuban Government already had admitted a group of interested U.S. citizens and given them virtually unrestricted access to six Cuban prisons of their own choosing. Mr. DeWind was part of that U.S. group, which has already issued a report on Cuban prisons: good for the most part, "harsh and cruel" in some respects.

The Deputy Secretary of State did not mention, either, that the Federal and state authorities at the U.S. prisons the Cubans wanted to visit had welcomed the idea. It was the State Department alone that made the decision not to grant the visas.

Mr. Whitehead did say that commitments between the Institute for Policy Studies and the Government of Cuba were "not binding on the United States." Of course not, but in this case those promoting the exchange had good reason to hope for more than the

The State Department forbids Cuban inspections of U.S. prisons.

usual State Department narrow-mindedness on the issue of admissions to the vaunted "open society" of the United States.

The agreement between the I.P.S., a liberal Washington think tank, and the National Union of Cuban Jurists had called for reciprocal prison inspections in Cuba and the U.S. Originally, the U.S. team was not to be admitted to Cuba until the Cuban group had received visas to enter the U.S.; but with undue optimism the Cubans waived that requirement and admitted the U.S. inspection group last February.

The U.S. team has reported that it visited the six prisons it had asked to see and conducted confidential interviews (with no Cuban authorities present) with more than 120 inmates. The Americans had specified more than 40 prisoners they wanted to see, and selected the rest at random. At least 50 of those interviewed were "political prisoners," most of them specifically designated by the visitors. The sites of the interviews, both indoors and outdoors, were randomly selected by the U.S. group. Transportation and lodging were provided by the Cuban Government.

Nothing was done to prevent the visitors from reporting in some detail on "extremely harsh punishment cells" for inmates who resist "political re-education" or violate discipline, small "iron cages" for problem prisoners, highly restrictive visitation rules, and beatings at Boniato and Combinado del Este prisons.

On the other hand, the U.S. inspectors found little overcrowding, decent medical facilities, generally clean and hygienic conditions and a well-established system of conjugal visits. No reports of torture by officials were heard from the inmates interviewed. About 85 percent of the Cuban prison population works, many being paid at civilian rates and learning practical skills. A basic education program aims at bringing all to at least the ninth-grade level.

If Cuban Government figures are correct, however, there are 32,000 Cubans, from a population of 10 million, in prisons and detention centers (not including military prisons) — a ratio of 3.2 inmates per 1,000 Cubans. The U.S., with a population of 240 million, imprisons about 820,000 people (including military prisoners) — or 3.4 per 1,000. Thus, the U.S. team concluded that if Cuban military prisons were included, the imprisonment rate in the two countries would be about the same. That further suggests that the length of sentences must be about the same — and the U.S. has some of the longest sentences anywhere.

The striking thing is that the Government of Fidel Castro proved more willing than the State Department to let outsiders inspect its prisons. No wonder Adrian DeWind observed that "when reciprocal visits with the Soviet Union are becoming the order of the day, I am at a loss to understand why a similar opening to Cuba is rejected, thus discouraging the further opening up of Cuban institutions."

Why not a little glasnost, in other words, at the State Department? □