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How Prison Talks Failed: Step by Step

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ATTICA, N. Y., Sept. 13—

At 9:43:28 this morning the power went off in the small littered steward's room on the second floor of the Attica Correctional Facility's administration building.

The hands of an electric clock on the wall pointed to that second for almost two hours, while state policemen and other officers put a

bloody end to a massive uprising by about 1,500 inmates—mostly black and Puerto Rican.

To the 17 men in the room, the hands marked the moment of truth—the second when the end came for four days of emotional and exhausting effort to avoid the bloodshed that every one of them feared from the beginning. For 28 of the prisoners with whom they had vainly “negotiated” and for nine of the hostages the prisoners had been holding, death had been signaled.

At 9:48 A.M., five minutes after the lights went out, armed troopers moved behind fire hoses down the littered, gasoline-smelling corridor the 17 men and their colleagues had used in a series of harrowing visits to

the prisoners' stronghold in Cell Block D and its exercise yard.

Other assaulting forces came over the walls that surrounded the exercise yard. By about 11 A.M., the prison authorities said that the situation was virtually “secure,” although some cell block areas remained to be finally cleared. Active resistance had ceased.

Some members of the unusual group of 17 citizen “observers,” summoned by the prisoners and authorized by the state authorities to try to find a peaceful solution, had believed all along that none could be devised. Others had hoped to the last. All had drained themselves emotionally and physically,

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NOSI version is much longer.

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when failure put an end to their efforts and to the lives of 37 men.

Gazing out the window of the steward's room at the helmeted troopers and the drifts of gas floating across the prison grounds, two of the 17-member group, Republican Herman Badillo of the New York City and this correspondent, assured each

other that they had done all they could — and each saw in the other's eyes that the assurance was needed.

"There's always time to die," Mr. Badillo said. "I don't know what the rush was."

Behind him, at another window, a young lawyer and penologist named Julian Topper said in a flat, tired voice, "I can see eight bodies on the ground dead."

There were a few moments of silence. Then:

"You know," said Bill Gaiter, a bearded, eloquent black who heads the BUILD community action organization in Buffalo, "I was amazed at Kent State . . . shocked by Jackson State . . . but this . . . to see a decision being formulated that leads to so many deaths . . . I don't believe I'll ever be able to forget this."



The New York Times

AS PRISON WAS STORMED: National Guard helicopter flies by as officers enter gate

This is the story—at least a first attempt to tell it—of a strange, interracial, interfaith, ad hoc, semi-official, semi-political, always desperate effort to achieve some other decision, and of the more than 20 men who failed in that effort. (There was never a precise roster of members of the so-called Observers' Committee.)

Sought by Prisoners

The core membership of the committee was summoned by the rebellious prisoners themselves. Soon after they seized Cell Block D and 38 hostages, they issued a preliminary list of 15 demands and appended a roster of persons they wished to have participate in negotiations for a settlement.

Individuals listed, who later participated, were William M. Kunstler, the left-wing "movement" lawyer; Assemblyman Arthur O. Eve of Buffalo; Clarence Jones, editor and publisher of the Amsterdam New in New York; Richard Roth of The Buffalo Evening News; Jim Ingram of The Michigan Journal, and this correspondent.

Organizations from which representatives were asked were the Solidarity Prison

'Escape-Proof' Attica Lost a Prisoner April 9

The Attica Correctional Facility, with a reputation for supposedly escape-proof gates, saw that reputation challenged last April 9, when Joseph Sullivan made it past the walls, completing the first escape from Attica in 40 years.

Prison authorities were unable to explain how Sullivan, 22 years old and serving a 20-to-30-year sentence for second-degree manslaughter, managed to get out. The prison was searched and re-searched because officials at first refused to believe that Sullivan was outside. They thought he might be hiding in an obscure corner of the prison.

But on May 19, a month-long manhunt ended here in Greenwich Village when Sullivan was apprehended as he walked down 11th Street toward University Place, dressed in a sports jacket and carrying an unloaded sawed-off .22-caliber rifle. He was returned to Attica.

Committee and the Young Lords party.

Several other individuals, none of whom proved able to take part in the committee, were listed. They included Huey P. Newton, the Black Panther leader, and Minister John B. X. of the Black Muslims.

Around this core group, state officials — summoning some members themselves, as in the case of Mr. Badillo — allowed a much larger group to form. Some apparently were self-nominated; others came from interested groups, such as Mr. Gaiter's BUILD; still others were appealed to by close associates or friends who were already serving on the committee.

Probably the best known to the public, of those who served through all or most of the four-day uprising, were Mr. Biddle, State Senator John R. Dunne of Nassau County, State Senator Robert Garcia of the Bronx, Mr. Eve and Mr. Kunstler.

First Talks Held

Mr. Eve, the first member on the scene, probably came nearer than any other to being the group's leader or chairman. But it had no formal organization, rules or procedures and, in the end, most members were able to feel that each had played important roles—though none had succeeded.

The prison uprising began Thursday morning; by Friday afternoon, most of the members had reached Attica and had been led through bands of heavily armed guards and troopers into the tense atmosphere of the prison buildings.

2 of 4 Caught, Hostage Safe In Norwich Hospital Escape

NORWICH, Conn., Sept. 13 (AP)—Four Norwich State Hospital inmates escaped from the maximum security unit today, but two were quickly captured by the state police and a woman hostage was found unharmed.

One escaper was caught on Interstate Route 95 in Waterford as he was driving a white truck owned by a flower shop in Prestin. The state police said that Mrs. John Stewart, wife of the florist, was being taken as a hostage.

The two captured inmates were identified as Dennis Noonan, 31 years old, and Robert McAuliffe, 27. Their hometowns were not immediately ascertained.



The New York Times/Michael Evans

RELATIVE OF A GUARD questioning a correction officer about the fate of hostages during the storming.



Associated Press

RELATIVE OF A DEAD HOSTAGE being comforted after hearing the outcome of the fighting inside the prison.