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Investigating Attica

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The enormity of the tragedy at Attica and the many question marks that hang over the slaughter of hostages and prisoners there requires the most searching inquiry, conducted under the most impartial circumstances. Such an inquiry is important to every official and citizen of New York State, from Governor Rockefeller down; it is important to the whole cause of justice and respect for the rule of law.

At this moment the one thing clear is that there will be no shortage in the number of investigations, but it is not at all clear there will be even one that will command the universal confidence an inquiry into the bloody events at Attica should have. A House Crime subcommittee has now joined the list of probers; the Governor is meeting with legislative leaders to plan the state's "official" investigation; at least two key legislators are moving toward separate inquiries; grand juries and "super-cops" are mobilizing in the wings.

The horror of Attica is too overwhelming to allow any ghoulish taint of politics or publicity-seeking. What is needed is an inquiry that will be credible at one and at the same time in every corner of the state—from the prison community, where the widows and orphans of correctional personnel mourn, to the urban slums, which were once the turbulent homes of most of the rebellious convicts who died in a hail of police bullets Monday.

The investigators must be broadly representative of all elements in the community, especially since racial tensions were so pervasive an underlying factor in the revolt and its savage denouement. Those who serve on the panel should not have participated in any way in the events at the prison; they should be totally independent of the Governor and, preferably, removed from politics altogether. The Chief Judge of New York State, Stanley H. Fuld, might well be asked to make the choices to insure the panel's detachment.

The sooner such an inquiry gets under way and the more exhaustively it looks into every aspect of this dismaying episode, including how to make sure it will be the last such holocaust, the better off the state will be.