

Rockefeller Revisited

By JOHN A. HAMILTON

In the aftermath of Attica, the bloodiest prison uprising in all American history, Governor Rockefeller may well emerge with a new political image in much of the country. It was his decision to send police forces storming into the prison facility to rescue guards being held as hostages and to restore order. While in the past he has been considered liberal, so liberal that conservative elements in the G.O.P. once booed him from their Presidential nominating convention hall, today he may be considered conservative. These same elements are sending him congratulatory telegrams.

To be sure, the political argot is not wholly satisfactory here. Terms like "liberal" and "conservative" are vague and somewhat like the fog; they cover a lot of ground but not very well. Some, like Samuel Brittan, the English journalist, understand just how treacherous is the ideological terrain and have suggested replacing "liberal" with "tender-minded" and "conservative" with "tough-minded." To send police forces with guns blazing into the Attica prison was certainly "tough-minded."

The decision, "tough-minded" or "conservative," fits perfectly with the pattern of other recent Rockefeller moves. It does not change his image at home so much as confirm it. Long a conservative in foreign affairs, a "hawk" militarily and an advocate of massive defense expenditures, Mr. Rockefeller has steadily become more conservative domestically as well.

Attica relates to Mr. Rockefeller's gubernatorial career as an hour to a day; it is alike but shorter in duration. In a strange sort of way the sequence of events at Attica can be compared in microcosm to the evolution of Mr. Rockefeller's thinking during the thirteen years of his gubernatorial career. The contours are the same. This is perhaps their most remarkable characteristic.

For when Attica began, Governor Rockefeller acted like a liberal, permitting prison officials to negotiate with rebellious inmates holding guards as hostages, adding his personal choices to those of the inmates for membership on an observers' panel,

agreeing ultimately to consider favorably 28 of the prisoners' 30 demands for reforms in correctional procedures. This was a stunning scenario, and liberals could have considered it an epitome of restraint and reasonableness. The only two demands rejected were those for total amnesty and for the removal of the prison superintendent.

Then, suddenly, almost without warning, a change came. Having permitted four days of frantic negotiations and concessions to be made all along the way, Governor Rockefeller refused to go to Attica to meet with the observer panel. This was the watershed decision, shortly to be followed by the even more fateful and difficult decision—taken in the same new conservative, or tough-minded, vein—to proceed with the armed attack. Mr. Rockefeller's entire gubernatorial career parallels the evolution of his thinking in the Attica affair.

When he came to office originally, there was "tender-mindedness." Mr. Rockefeller initiated and campaigned for the nation's most comprehensive Medicaid program and for programs to liberalize welfare in other ways; he pumped money into public elementary and secondary schools while almost doubling the state university's number of campuses; he created the State Housing Finance Agency to aid the construction of middle-income housing, launched the nation's first Pure Waters Program and secured enactment of a landmark Conservation Bill of Rights.

Then the flow of progressive—"liberal" or "tender-minded"—legislation slacked. To look back is to see that in 1969 the tide reversed, that while some progressive programs still had Governor Rockefeller as their champion, they were fewer and other actions were taking place much more pleasing to the G.O.P. right wing. The year 1969 was, in fact, the "liberal-conservative" watershed in Governor Rockefeller's regime. Medicaid coverage was reduced. Welfare benefits were slashed. In the 1970 gubernatorial campaign, Mr. Rockefeller effected an alliance with the Conservative party, which had been formed in opposition to his prior liberalism. He

accepted Conservative party support. Sixteen of the 31 Republicans in the State Senate won with Conservative party endorsements; some 40 of the 79 Republicans in the State Assembly did the same. His name appeared on many ballots on the same line with that of James L. Buckley, the Conservative party's successful candidate for the United States Senate.

The climax came with the last session of the State Legislature, confirming Mr. Rockefeller's conservative stance. Welfare cutbacks recommended by the Governor were enacted, along with a law creating the new office of Welfare Inspector General to crack down on welfare cheating. A palpably unconstitutional residency requirement similar to ones the Governor, in his earlier years, had routinely vetoed was also rammed into law. Health, mental hygiene and youth programs suffered cash cuts in budgetary levels from the year before while urban areas and their public schools received less state assistance than they were promised under existing formulas.

With the transformation in Governor Rockefeller's political posture has come a transformation in his relationship with President Nixon. After opposing Mr. Nixon for the G.O.P. Presidential nomination in 1960 and again in 1968, and saying some less than kind things about him both publicly and privately, Mr. Rockefeller has joined the President in efforts to achieve welfare reforms and the sharing of Federal revenues by the states. Where Mr. Rockefeller once privately worried about Mr. Nixon's emotional stability, he now publicly praises him as "a truly strong leader" and "a truly wise man." One of the first telephone calls Mr. Rockefeller made after giving the order to storm the prison and retake it by force was to Mr. Nixon, who supported the decision.

So, Attica—aside from being an enormous tragedy—is a speeded-up political reel and, in microcosm, the story of a transformation in philosophy from "liberal" to "conservative" that finds its larger reflection in a whole gubernatorial career.

John A. Hamilton is a member of the editorial board of *The Times*.