

Attica's Reverberations

AT THIS WRITING it is not known exactly who was responsible for the misinformation that the hostages at Attica prison died from throat-slitting done by the prisoners, or even whether the man who gave out that information did so innocently, or intending to deceive.

If it was the latter, the gentleman can be dismissed as stupid. If the former—let us say he mistook blood in the area of the neck as having been caused by knives rather than bullets — then the headlines shrink in one's memory.

WHAT IS SURPRISING is the extent to which the revelation that the guards were killed inadvertently by their colleagues has proved publicly embarrassing to New York state officials. Granted that Governor Rockefeller, in justifying his approval of the armed intervention, cited the slaughtered hostages as vindicating his judgment.

Now it turns out that the hostages were slaughtered by the liberating forces. Does that mean that Governor Rockefeller was not justified in ordering the liberation? No it does not. The fallacy of the contrapositive.

About one hundred million Americans saw representatives of the prisoners on television saying in no uncertain words that unless every one of their demands was granted they would proceed to execute the hostages. How is the judgment of Nelson Rockefeller invalidated? Should he have said: I looked the threateners in the eye, on television, and deduced that they would not carry out their threat?

Should he have asked Tom Wicker to relay a request that the prisoners submit to a lie-detector test, on the question whether they truly intended to murder the guards? Who, on receiving a kidnaper's note threatening to kill the victim, will proceed on the assumption that the kidnaper is bluffing?

And anyway, isn't it time to stress that 28 hostages did get away after Rockefeller's intervention? Suppose Governor Rock-

efeller had waited another two or three days, or a week, and then, in a fit of impatience, the prisoners had executed the lot of the hostages? What would they be saying then to Nelson Rockefeller? That he waited too long, obviously.

The prisoners demands ranged from reasonable (access to Spanish-speaking doctors for the sick) to playful (reduce the number of pork dishes) to effrontery (the prisoners are to be paid the minimum wage for all work done) (so why not charge them room and board?).

What catches the attention are the guarantees of "true religious freedom"—Translate: Black Muslimism, and systematic inculcation of race hatred; and "allow(ing) all inmates to communicate with anyone they please," and an end to censorship of any periodical or reading matter.

The last is clearly aimed at opening revolutionary faucets. It was a surprise to everyone how ideologized the prisoners at Attica were. They all sounded as though they had been schooled by Weathermen. Their hatred of America was straight out of the pages of the children's section of the Worker, ditto their slogans. We know less than we should about the pathology of prisoners. We know now that we shall need to ask more questions than we find on the usual lists of questions to be asked about penology.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that human beings look elsewhere — anywhere — rather than to themselves to find the cause of guilt. John killed Jane because Jane is insufferable. Harry robbed the bank because the bank is a cancer on society. James burned down the building because he had to express his resentment of American racism. Ho hum.

But the insubstantiality of the argument is not a license for ignoring its appeal, particularly in an age when such thought finds itself, at almost any academy, support from intellectual quarters. On with the investigation.