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Rahway and Attica

Cahill 'Would Not Compare' 2 Prison Revolts, but Some Note the Differences

By DAVID K. SHIPLER

"I would not compare Rahway with Attica," Gov. William T. Cahill remarked the other day. And he may have been right in saying so, because the conditions differed.

But others will make the comparison, for virtually every decision that the New Jersey Governor listed as important to the peaceful settlement of the prisoners' rebellion at Rahway State Prison last week was the opposite of

what Governor Rockefeller had decided during the inmate takeover of the Attica State Correctional Facility last September. Forty-three men died at Attica; none died at Rahway.

The police entered the prison at Attica and attacked; unarmed negotiators ended the revolt at Rahway.

Mr. Cahill journeyed to a school a half mile down the road from the prison; Mr. Rockefeller stayed away from Attica.

Mr. Cahill had his staff check out "rumors" that hostages were dead or dying; Mr. Rockefeller's people apparently believed similar false reports at Attica.

Mr. Cahill barred outside observers; Mr. Rockefeller admitted them to Attica prison.

Mr. Cahill excluded newsmen and television cameras from negotiations with prisoners; Mr. Rockefeller permitted their presence.

Different Demands Made

On the other hand, the inmates at Attica and Rahway presented each Governor with a different kind of crisis. Prisoners at the two institutions made different demands and decisions, and their actions played as great a role as the Governors' in determining the outcomes of the two rebellions.

The Rahway inmates gave up their hostages after receiving much less from the state than the Attica inmates had received and rejected.

The Attica prisoners had at one point, won concessions from the state on their 28 demands, but they held out for amnesty. The Rahway inmates won nothing but the Governor's pledge to consider their grievances and to pursue that there would be no corporal punishment for the uprising.

Speculation on why the Rahway inmates gave up their hostages after achieving what seemed to be so little has centered on two factors.

Captured Area Cold

First, the two prison wings they had captured were freezing. Prison authorities had turned off the electricity and the heat, and the windows smashed by inmates left the cellblocks open to the sleet and ice wind that drove across the flat land of eastern New Jersey.

Firemen added to the prisoners' discomfort by shooting high-powered streams of water through the windows to douse several fire sthe inmates had set in an effort to keep warm.

The Attica prisoners were certainly more comfortable, since the warmer weather in early September made it possible for them to pitch makeshift tents outside in D yard, which they had under their control.

Second, the Rahway inmates appeared less ideological, less political than the leaders at Attica. A statement issued through a group of lawyers by unidentified leaders of the Attica rebellion, for example, contained the declaration, "We are not criminals, nor are we enemies of the people."

In contrast, the final paragraph of the Rahway prisoners'

"petition" of grievances said in part: "We are sincerely trying to correct the mistakes we have made in the past against other people. We not only want to correct the mistakes but we wish to prevent mistakes. The help must come from you and we are desperately asking you for this help."

Amnesty Barrier at Attica

The Attica prisoners' demands, as well as their rhetoric, went beyond the demands at Rahway.

At Attica the inmates asked for amnesty, a demand that grew in importance after the death of William Quinn, a guard who suffered a fractured skull during the melee at the outset of the rebellion.

In the intense emotion of the four-day Attica Revolt, it never became clear how serious the amnesty issue was in the failure of the negotiations, nor how many inmates were adamant on the question. Some inmates seemed to disbelieve the state's other concessions, charging that similar promises were broken after a one-day uprising at Auburn State Prison early this year.

At Rahway, although the cry, "Amnesty, amnesty," was shouted by some inmates through barred windows, it apparently never took the form of a hard demand during negotiations.

The negotiations themselves were of a different quality at Rahway. State officials talked through the bars, according to some who were inside, so they never had to walk into prisoner-controlled territory as they did in Attica.

And the Rahway inmates apparently did not insist that certain observers be brought into the negotiations, as the prisoners did at Attica.

Publicity Factor at Attica

The very presence of the observers in Attica, including some well-known lawyers, legislators and public figures, seemed to lift the inmates' spirits, giving them a sense of power.

And some of the observers have admitted that their fear of the inmates led them away from candor during their last visit to the yard, prompting them to avoid telling the prisoners bitter truths they did not want to hear about their negotiating position. Perhaps in the process they raised false hopes that amnesty and other demands were attainable.

The Attica inmates also insisted that newsmen and television cameras be present at negotiations, and some officials believe now that prisoners' ability to see themselves on television inflamed their rhetoric and made serious discussions almost impossible.

The talks at Rahway were conducted in private by state officials who granted the inmates' requests for the press only after they had released one hostage and promised to release the others.

Even then, no cameras were allowed inside. Cameramen and reporters were kept 100 yards away from the prison, so the inmates demands, shouted through barred windows, could barely be heard by the newsmen.

Even after the end of the one-day Rahway rebellion, differences emerged. To date, the inmates at Rahway have told lawyers they were not beaten, as Attica prisoners charged happened to them, and so far President Nixon has not yet praised Governor Cahill publicly, as he did Governor Rockefeller.