

Rocky's Image in Smithereens

By Betty Flynn

NEW YORK — (ODN) — Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's already fragmented image as a liberal figurehead in the Republican party has been shattered by his decision-making on the Attica prison tragedy.

The man who was booed and catcalled as a liberal outcast at the 1964 GOP convention that nominated Barry Goldwater is now hailed as the hero of Law-and-Order in conservative quarters.

Rockefeller, according to the right-wing editorial page of the New York Daily News, is due "great credit" for declining to "weaken or demean our system of criminal justice."

But to many liberal politicians and community leaders who once saw Rockefeller on their side, his refusal to accede to a prisoner request Sunday to join personally in negotiations and his support of the Monday onslaught is the final arc in a full circle swing to the right.

Held 'Blatantly Repressive'

"It is one of the most callous and blatantly repressive acts ever carried out by a supposedly civilized society on its own people," said Newark's black mayor, Kenneth Gibson.

"The governor could have given more," said Rep. Herman Badillo (D-N.Y.), the nation's only Puerto Rican congressman and a member of the observer committee that spent long hours inside Cell block D. "If Rockefeller had shown, we would have gained additional time."

"I do not feel that my physical presence on the site can contribute to a peaceful settlement," was Rockefeller's terse reply to the prisoner request, adding that he was "deeply grateful" to have been asked.

Worth Losing 'Face'

"The unanswerable question that will haunt the state," wrote James Wechsler, the thoughtful columnist and former editor of the New York Post, which supported Rocky in 1966, "is whether this disaster could have been averted if Governor Rockefeller had responded to the



CALLS ATTICA A "TRAGEDY"

Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York

pleas . . . for his personal appearance . . .

"What could have been risked by such a gubernatorial expedition even if it proved unsuccessful? 'Face'? Isn't it conceivable that his appearance would have in fact provided the face-saver that would have enabled the inmates to back away from their more fantastic demands?"

David Rothenberg, 38, executive secretary of the Fortune Society, a New York rehabilitation group for former convicts, agreed that Rockefeller would have been a "force strong and powerful enough to pull it all together."

"The biggest feeling among the prisoners is the sense of powerlessness," said John Sunch, Jr., 27, who left Attica in June after serving 15 months for armed robbery.

"If Rockefeller had gone there, this whole thing might have been different. The guys wanted someone there who couldn't pass the buck. It could have relieved the situation."

Wechsler and others were citing, if not equating, the late Adlai Stevenson's courageous stand at the Menard (Ill.) prison riot during the 1962 presidential campaign, which he interrupted to appear personally in the prison yard with an ultimatum. Order was restored shortly thereafter with no violence.

Lindsay's Riot Recalled

And City Hall officials were making the same cautious comparisons with Mayor John Lindsay's handling of New York City prison riots last October, when hostages were released unharmed after Lindsay promised to make personal appearances at three jails where rioting had broken out.

"Rockefeller was in a horrible dilemma and it's not really fair to make exact parallels," a City Hall source conceded. "But the thinking around here is if you don't go in immediately and negotiations begin, then it has to be treated more or less like labor negotiations. They have certain cards, you have certain cards, whatever your values. And even seemingly intractable and outrageous demands have a way of giving way after a while."

"I emphasize that no one knows whether (Rockefeller) could have prevented this nightmare," columnist Wechsler wrote yesterday. "But many of us — I would like to believe including Nelson Rockefeller — would sleep more serenely if he had tried."