

Postscript to a Massacre

In the aftermath of perhaps the most gruesome prison massacre in America's history, with the death toll at Attica already at 41 and expected to go higher, grave questions have arisen about the accuracy of the story released by state officials on what happened when police officers stormed into the beleaguered jail with guns blazing. Only a swift and totally impartial investigation can clear up the confusion now beclouding this grim tragedy.

A medical examiner, after an autopsy on the bodies of slain guards, flatly contradicted yesterday the state's report that the rebellious Attica prisoners slashed the throats of some of their hostages. The strong indication now is that all the dead guards—and most of the dead convicts—were killed by bullets. And only the police attack force had guns.

If official deception proves another dismaying element in this whole monstrous episode, the credibility of all government will be undermined in an area crucial to the maintenance of the rule of law. It will be difficult, indeed, to rebut the belief of many on the scene that more restraint on the part of authorities and more time to press peace efforts might have ended the five-day rampage by prisoners at the upstate correctional institution without the loss of a single life—hostage or convict.

Governor Rockefeller justified the assault on the prison compound in a statement that spoke of prisoners having "carried out cold-blooded killings they had threatened from the start" of their takeover. One prison official asserted that at least two of the guards being held captive by the prisoners had been killed by them prior to the police assault and that the body of one had been mutilated. Another official reported immediately after the foray that the rest of the slain hostages had had their throats cut and been beaten by the rioters.

But a diametrically opposite report came yesterday from Dr. John Edland, the medical examiner for Monroe County, whose autopsy showed that the hostages died not from slashed throats but from gunshot wounds. Prison authorities concede that inmates had no guns so the shots must have come from the police forces storming the compound.

This vital finding not only contradicts the prison officials but also raises fresh doubts about the wisdom of Governor Rockefeller's refusal to make a personal visit to Attica, as urged by the citizen observer panel that was seeking to effect a peaceful agreement at the prison.

State officials, with the Governor's concurrence, had made every reasonable concession in the earlier stages of the uprising. They had rightly refused to bend on two demands that would have permanently undermined discipline at Attica and at every penal institution in the country: total amnesty for the rebels and forced removal of the prison superintendent.

The deadlock heightened tensions and created a real hazard for the hostages, a factor that could not be ignored by the Governor. Yet, it was the panel's strong belief that the situation might yet be saved without mayhem by a personal appearance by the Governor, not to negotiate with the prisoners but to get a first-hand report from the observers.

The panel felt a need for additional negotiating time. Prison officials evidently felt a need to force the issue immediately. The Governor physically remote from the conflict, decided with the officials and against the panel.

The decision was indeed a "tough" decision—but the latest disclosures make it far from clear that state officials were right in storming the compound when they did or that, as President Nixon confided to a group of Congressional Republicans yesterday, Mr. Rockefeller had "no other course available to him."

What is clear is that the public deserves a thoroughgoing and absolutely impartial investigation. Every aspect of this tragedy emphasizes a need both for fundamental correctional reforms and for an inquiry to establish facts.