

Attica's Legal Gadfly

Robert Porter Patterson Jr.

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By LEE DEMBART

When Robert P. Patterson Jr. was a student at the Columbia Law School in the late nineteen-forties, he didn't really want to practice law. Only in his last year, when he found that law could mean public service, did he decide to enter the profession. Now a senior partner in Patterson, Belknap & Webb (the Patterson is his late father, who was Secretary of War), Mr. Patterson for years has been devoting the lion's share of his time to public-service law, most recently in prison reform and the Attica prison case.

He has been a prime mover in charging that the prosecution has covered up or failed to act on evidence of crimes by law enforcement officers during and after the suppression of the prisoner rebellion.

A shy, soft-spoken man who genuinely eschews the limelight, Mr. Patterson is a past president of the Legal Aid Society and a leader in state and city bar associations. He has lived much of his life in the shadow of his distinguished father, rebelling in youth, emulating in maturity.

"I didn't want to be a lawyer when I went to law school because I didn't want to follow in my father's footsteps," Mr. Patterson said yesterday as he ate a tuna salad sandwich and sipped lukewarm coffee from a plastic cup in his office overlooking Rockefeller Center.

"My father was a very good public servant," he said. "I've got five kids. I suppose some day I hope to have their respect."

From Father to Son

The senior Mr. Patterson, who was killed in an airplane crash near Newark Airport in 1952, had been a Federal judge before becoming Secretary of War in 1945, turning down a Supreme Court appointment to take the post. People who knew him say he passed his character on to his son.



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"His father was noteworthy for his absolute integrity," a friend said yesterday. "He was straight as a dye, and you could feel that the moment he walked into the room. That was the good quality. He was also damned sure he was right. Always."

"Bob has that same quality. His integrity is absolutely unassailable. But Bob is also, as his father was, absolutely certain that he is right."

Since 1971, when Justice Harry D. Goldman of the Appellate Division appointed him to a five-man panel to protect the rights of inmates at Attica following the uprising, Mr. Patterson's single-mindedness has been turned toward the upstate prison.

"One of the concerns of the Goldman panel was whether crimes against inmates, which immediately came to our attention, were going to be prosecuted," Mr. Patterson said.

Bell in Audience

Despite continuing pressure, he added, it became clear that they were not.

In January, Mr. Patterson raised the subject at a bar association meeting on Attica. In the audience was Malcolm H. Bell, who had resigned from the Attica prosecution team a month before and had written Governor Carey a 160-page report detailing the

alleged cover-up of crimes committed by law enforcement officers.

Mr. Bell retained Mr. Patterson to help him "get an effective response," Mr. Patterson said yesterday. "We were afraid that the report may have been buried under the Governor's incoming mail."

In recent years, Mr. Patterson, a Republican who wears narrow neckties and button-down collars, has led tours by politicians and businessmen through the city's jails, arguing for more money for the courts to cut down detention time.

Wild Blue Beckons

"I don't think I'm a person who believes that there shouldn't be any prisons, period," he said. "But even a violent criminal is entitled to the basic elements of human dignity."

Robert Porter Patterson Jr. was born in New York on July 11, 1923, but grew up in Putnam County, where his family had a home in Cold Spring, which he now uses on weekends. He prepared at the Millbrook School, enrolled at Harvard College in 1941, stayed long enough to complete his freshman year and then enlisted in the Army Air Forces.

Four years later, he was discharged as a captain, having flown 45 combat missions as a navigator and winning the Distinguished Flying Cross. He returned to Harvard, graduating in 1947.

After graduation from law school in 1950, Mr. Patterson joined the law firm of Donovan, Leisure, Newton, Lumbard & Irvine, then worked as assistant counsel to the State Crime Commission, and finally was an assistant United States attorney before going to Patterson, Belknap in 1956.

While at Donovan, he was sent to work for two months as a Legal Aid volunteer at the criminal courts, which sparked his continuing interest in legal rights for the poor. In 1961 he became a director of Legal Aid, and from 1967 to 1971 he was the society's president.

Mr. Patterson married the former Bevin Daly in 1956. They live at 901 Lexington Avenue with children ranging from 17 years old to 5. A sixth child died of leukemia in 1962 at the age of 3.

"Say something nice about my wife," Mr. Patterson urged. "Whenever I'm concerned about whether I'm doing something right, she gives me good advice."