

WARNING: THIS VIDEO CLIP CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE USED BY ANGRY, UPSET PEOPLE WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE ATTICA PRISON UPRISING. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

In its series "Eyes on the Prize," PBS includes a segment on the [Attica Prison Uprising](#) and how it was handled by Nelson Rockefeller (then the governor of New York). The following is excerpted from a description of those events:

On the morning of Monday, September 13, 1971, Governor Nelson Rockefeller arrived at his Fifth Avenue apartment for a meeting with some of his advisors. It had been a tough weekend, but he had finally reached a decision. It was, he told them, "a matter of principle."

The Attica State Penitentiary - the scene of an inmate uprising just five days earlier - was to be retaken by force. What followed was the bloodiest prison confrontation in U.S. history, and the most unfortunate episode in Rockefeller's political career - one that would haunt the family name for decades to come.

Trouble was in the air in the summer of 1971. The Vietnam war, court-ordered busing of students to integrate schools racially, and student protests had shaken the country. Prisons were seeing a surge in the pressure - both from within and from without prison walls - to recognize the rights of inmates, fueled in part by racial unrest.

In the imposing Attica State Penitentiary, a maximum-security facility 30 miles south of Buffalo, New York, the tension had been particularly palpable for months.

Inmates, who were predominantly African American and Puerto Rican, were incensed at the deteriorating living conditions - among them the fact that they were only entitled to one shower a week and one roll of toilet paper a month. Overcrowding had also become a source of resentment in a facility where the capacity limit had been exceeded by almost forty percent.

It was this pent-up unrest that prompted one of the guards to forcefully suppress a scuffle between two prisoners on September 9, 1971. The two inmates were taken to isolation cells. Rumors circulated that they would be tortured.

Confrontations escalated between the prisoners and the guards.

The following day, violence boiled over when a group of inmates managed to leave their cells and force their way into the prison's nerve center, where they beat several guards with pieces of pipe, lengths of chain, and baseball bats, fatally injuring one of them.

More than one thousand strong, the inmates quickly took control of the prison and set fire to several of its buildings. By the time the state police were summoned, and managed to recapture part of the facility that afternoon, the inmates had regrouped in one of the yards and were holding 40 hostages in a ring of wooden benches.

Their demands were soon made public:

- Federal takeover of the prison;
- Better conditions;
- Amnesty for the crimes committed during the revolt; and
- Removal of the prison's superintendent.

In their statement, the prisoners criticized the "unmitigated oppression wrought by the racist administrative network of this prison throughout the year," and the "ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States."

Those words had a troubling ring for Nelson Rockefeller, who in his last years as governor had toughened his stand on crime and political dissent. He believed that the rebellion was led by revolutionaries, and that any sign of compromise would have a domino effect throughout the nation.

Having sent one of his closest aides to the scene, the governor retreated to the Rockefeller estate in Pocantico Hills, just a few miles outside of New York City.

Four hundred miles upstate, things were quickly heating up. A group of observers had been trying in vain to come up with a compromise package. On Sunday, three days after the outbreak, they issued a statement, calling on Rockefeller to come to the prison to avert a "massacre... so we can spend time and not lives in an attempt to resolve the issues before us."

The pressure on the governor to come to Attica was mounting, as the inmates and even the Commissioner of Correctional Services, Russell Oswald, urged him to address the situation in person.

"We must have Rockefeller," said one of the inmates' leaders. "We got to have Rockefeller here to save our

lives and those of his hostages. ... I say his hostages because he created this situation."

But Rockefeller wouldn't budge. Saying that his physical presence on the site would not "contribute to a peaceful settlement," he vowed to stand fast and rely on his aides on the scene, among them Robert Douglass. "In life it's not easy to face a hard decision, particularly when human lives are involved," he told Commissioner Oswald, "But I think we have to look at these things not only in terms of the immediate but in terms of the larger implication of what we are doing in our society."

By Sunday night, hopes for a non-violent compromise solution were wearing thin, and on Monday morning Rockefeller, determined to appear firm, authorized the operation to reclaim the facility.

See, also:

Attica Prison Riot, Part 1

Attica Prison Riot, Part 3

Credits:

This clip, from "A Nation of Law? (1968-1971)," is part of the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize." Clip online, courtesy PBS.

Quoted passage, from "The Rockefellers," online courtesy PBS and "American Experience."

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Uprising-at-Attica-Prison-Part-2>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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