

## Attica

Last year marked 50 years since the country's most infamous and deadly prison uprising, an anniversary recognized by the release of a major documentary of that name. "Attica" was recently chosen as one of the Best Documentary films of 2021 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, an amazing re-telling of a landmark event. The film's setting is grim, yes, but the historical recounting of this searing event merits discovery by new generations.

Attica had seen unrest for some time before the uprising with inmates protesting horrendous conditions at the facility and systemic racist attitudes omnipresent (the prison population was about two-thirds black and brown.) As one surviving inmate sardonically says in the film: "We had 70 percent brown and black prisoners and all the guards were white; what could go wrong." As one oldster from the time recounted: "Inmates were considered like animals."

A morning incident on September 9, 1971, triggered a sudden lockdown in one section of the Attica with inmates breaking barriers and taking 42 hostages. In an overcrowded prison of over 2,000 prisoners, more than half took part in the protest, taking over one whole wing of the facility.

Asked about how the directors, Stanley Nelson and Traci Curry, came up with the film's footage, Nelson said they had plenty of material, principally because the inmates invited the media in to see their plight. There was no lack of footage from local TV stations and national networks because the story was so singular and stunning.

Among the most intriguing footage shown, at length, are the negotiations between prison authorities and inmates, which lasted three days, and was fraught with tension and drama between unrelenting sides. Interviewed ex-prisoners said "what they wanted to achieve was to be seen--as human beings and not considered "animals." The sessions also featured a series of outside observers to oversee the talks, including notables such as *The New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker (who later wrote a book about the incident) and radical lawyer, William Kunstler, hardy defender of the inmates.

Governor Nelson Rockefeller played a major role in the impasse, mainly by not showing up. Though pressured to intervene personally to end the standoff, Rocky pointedly decided not to meet with the prisoners nor respond to their demands, leaving the police and nearby police forces free to retake the complex.

The impasse broke on the morning of September 13<sup>th</sup>, with the arrival of an assault helicopter and the release of tear gas over one of the prison yards, followed by a full scale assault on the unarmed inmates gathered there. It was no contest and lasted less than 20 minutes before the inmates surrendered and the uprising was over. The result: 33 inmates killed, 10 prison guards, all but four of them dead by police bullets.

Key to re-telling this appalling story was the decision to include dozens of interviews, many with surviving inmates of the time, now in their 70's and 80's, grizzled and regretful, eyewitnesses to the worst prison riot in our history.

One of those witnesses wryly observed that Attica was, "In many ways, the end of the 1960's," if not the end of prison reform.

*(The film is rated "TVMA" and runs one hour and 56 minutes, it is now available on Showtime and streaming on YouTube.)*

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