Prisoners appointed leaders to organize negotiations and manage the media. At the behest of the prisoners, Commissioner Oswald allowed outside observers access to witness the negotiations.

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL KULL
In September 1971, incarcerated men at the Attica State Correctional Facility found themselves in a standoff against New York State. Conditions at the prison were deplorable and dehumanizing—abuse, overcrowding, and inadequate food and medical care among the problems. Prisoners took 42 hostages from prison staff in an attempt to negotiate satisfactory changes.

The uprising took place after a decade of significant social change and upheaval in the United States. The civil rights movement questioned America’s commitment to equality and brought forward issues of social justice, while critics of President Johnson’s Great Society claimed the federal government was increasing the welfare state to the detriment of society. The Vietnam War provoked large-scale protests, radical student activism spread across college campuses, and militancy increased within the African American community. By the end of the 1960s, many Americans sought a restoration of “law and order,” prompting a resurgence of social conservatism by the early 1970s.

Attica is remembered as both a failure of the American prison system and a call for justice against human-rights violations. This exhibition presents various viewpoints of the uprising and its aftermath and explains why this event is still important 50 years later.
In July 1971, a group of prisoners calling themselves the Attica Liberation Faction presented Russell Oswald, the commissioner of Correctional Services, with a list of desired reforms. The prisoners called for improved living conditions, better medical care, increased wages in prison industry, and better oversight of facility staff. While Oswald publicly agreed with these reforms, none of them were achieved and frustrations intensified in the over-crowded prison.

On the morning of September 9, an argument between prisoners and guards led to a fight, which escalated and spread as the guards were overpowered. Correction Officer William Quinn was badly beaten during the altercations. Within 90 minutes, 42 guards and employees were taken hostage while more than 1,200 inmates assembled in D-yard.

After two days of organization, the prisoners presented a list of 28 demands, similar to the July manifesto. Commissioner Oswald accepted most of the prisoners’ demands but refused to provide amnesty to the protesters. On September 11, William Quinn died from his injuries; the announcement of his death quickly complicated the negotiations.
Despite several requests from the prisoners and the observers, Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller refused to travel to Attica for negotiations. On September 13, 1971, the New York State Police, correction officers, and local law enforcement brought the four-day standoff to a violent and bloody conclusion. According to the state’s official report, “The decision to retake the prison . . . was a decisive reassertion by the state of its sovereignty and power.” The forcible retaking of Attica left an additional 39 people dead, including nine hostages. All had been killed by gunfire from law enforcement.

Governor Rockefeller applauded the swift actions of the State Police, and false information about atrocities committed by prisoners against the hostages quickly spread. Once the state resumed control, those involved in the protest were subjected to an “orgy of brutality” at the hands of guards, including being stripped and beaten. Rebellion leaders were marked on their bodies with a chalk “X” and were tortured and harassed, waiting days for medical treatment. Families of the incarcerated anxiously waited for news of their loved ones, but most were never contacted.
Governor Rockefeller directed the State Attorney General’s Office to investigate “alleged criminal acts committed in connection with the five-day uprising at Attica.” Every death, injury, and violent act was potentially open to examination. This resulted in 42 indictments charging 62 prisoners with crimes and just one member of law enforcement being charged with reckless endangerment.

At the close of the state’s Attica inquiry in 1974, Malcolm Bell, a lawyer on the prosecutorial staff, publicly criticized the failure to prosecute crimes allegedly committed by law enforcement personnel. A resulting investigation, led by Hon. Bernard Meyer, found that serious errors of judgment and important omissions in gathering evidence resulted in an imbalance in the prosecution.

In 1976 Gov. Hugh Carey, hoping to “close the book on Attica,” pardoned seven convicted inmates and commuted the sentence of an eighth. Nevertheless, questions relating to the deaths or injuries of more than 100 correction officers, staff, and prisoners were never fully answered. In 2000, after several trials and appeals, a class-action civil suit filed on behalf of 1,281 Attica prisoners was settled for $12 million in damages.
FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF ATTICA:
“ONCE THE STATE DECIDED THE REBELLION WAS NO LONGER TOLERABLE, THE LIVES OF HOSTAGES WERE EXPENDABLE . . .”

— OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE NEW YORK STATE SPECIAL COMMISSION ON ATTICA, 1972

Shortly after the uprising, the state offered widows of the slain hostages workers’-compensation payments. It was not disclosed that acceptance of these payments precluded future legal action against New York State. Despite repeated promises of financial assistance, the families of the hostages were largely abandoned.

In 1999 the Forgotten Victims of Attica (FVOA) emerged, composed of former hostages, their families, and survivors of facility personnel killed during the uprising. With no avenue for a lawsuit, the FVOA embarked on a public-relations campaign to shame the State of New York into providing a monetary settlement. In 2001 Gov. George E. Pataki appointed an Attica Task Force to investigate issues raised by FVOA. The task force eventually agreed to a $12 million settlement in 2005, the same amount paid to the Attica Brothers.
“ATTICA IS A SYMBOL OF HOPE. THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DIGNITY, THE KINSHIP, EXPRESSED AND IMPLIED, AMONG BLACK, PUERTO RICAN, AND WHITE INMATES AND BETWEEN INMATES AND HOSTAGES IN CELL BLOCK D, SHOWS US WHAT YET MAY BE POSSIBLE IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL BROTHER AND SISTERHOOD IN OUR SOCIETY.”


ATTICA IS ALL OF US

“THAT’S WHY WE SAY ATTICA IS ALL OF US, ATTICA IS EVERYTHING. IN ORDER FOR ATTICA TO CHANGE, OUT HERE HAS TO CHANGE. WHAT WE SEE, FROM THE COMMUNITY, THROUGH THE POLICE DEPARTMENT, THROUGH THE COURTS AND INTO THE MAXIMUM PRISON. WE SAY THAT BOTH IS A PRISON; ONE IS MINIMUM AND ONE IS MAXIMUM.”

— FRANK “BIG BLACK” SMITH, AGENDA MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1991

Fears resulting from the uprising at Attica moved administrators and elected officials to increase control over prisons, while prison-reform advocates still pursue many of the same improvements the Attica Liberation Faction sought in 1971 but never achieved: access to educational and vocational opportunities; improved medical care, including substance-abuse treatment and mental-health support; an increase in prison-labor wages; and limits on the time spent in solitary confinement, as well as the recruitment of diverse correction officers. In recent years, New York State has taken steps to reverse the harmful policies it once adopted, dismantling of the Rockefeller Drug Laws and raising the age of criminal responsibility. However, incarceration numbers remain high and systemic racism continues to push people of color into prison at disproportionately higher rates. Fifty years after the Attica Prison Uprising, the event continues to serve as a reminder that reforms are still desperately needed in America’s prisons.