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## Nixon, Rockefeller discuss Attica in new tapes

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Associated Press

**BUFFALO, N.Y.** — Former President Richard Nixon offered his unqualified support to former New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller hours after the end of the deadly Attica prison uprising in 1971, telling the governor he backed him "to the hilt" and would get others to do the same, newly published audiotapes show.

"You did the right thing. It's a tragedy that these poor fellows were shot but I just want you to know that's my view and I've told the troops around here that I back that right to the hilt," Nixon told Rockefeller by telephone after Rockefeller ordered that 1,000 law enforcement officers to storm the prison and retake it from inmates who were holding dozens of guards hostage.

"Well aren't you great, Mr. President," Rockefeller replied in the recording made 40 years ago Tuesday.

The four-day revolt over living conditions and educational opportunities at the maximum-security prison in western New York left 29 inmates and 10 of their hostages dead. Most, including the hostages, were killed by police during the retaking.

Historian Theresa Lynch, an adjunct professor at the University of New Hampshire, discovered the recordings in the National Archives in Washington in 2004 and wrote about them in a dissertation before sharing them last week with Scott Christianson, a writer who made them available to The New York Times. The newspaper published excerpts Tuesday.

"I saw them as a window into Nixon and politics and the media and prisons, the intersection between those things," Lynch said Tuesday between panel discussions at a conference examining the legacy of Attica at the University at Buffalo.

Rockefeller had called Nixon before the assault to alert him to the plan and the possibility that hostages and hundreds of prisoners could be killed, the recordings show, but the president was in a cabinet meeting and missed the call. The two first spoke four hours after it was over, Lynch said.

While Rockefeller that first day praised the work of state police sharpshooters and called the retaking "a beautiful operation" a day later, he acknowledged "a little problem" — that some of the hostages were killed by troopers.

"Well, you know this is one of those things," Rockefeller said. "You can't have sharpshooters picking off the prisoners when the hostages are there with them at a distance with tear gas without maybe having a few accidents."

Replied Nixon: "Oh sure. Well you saved a lot of the guards."

"Thirty-two of them got out," Rockefeller said.

"That's what I mean. It was worth it," the president said.

Nixon asked Rockefeller whether blacks were primarily involved in the uprising.

"Oh yes, the whole thing was led by the blacks," Rockefeller said in part of an exchange experts

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"Notwithstanding the carnage at Attica and the importance of the protests that the inmates were trying to wage, at the end of the day the reaction on the part of Nixon is 'is this a black thing?'" said Temple University Professor Heather Ann Thompson, another panelist at the University at Buffalo conference.

"And Rockefeller assures him that it was," said Thompson, who is writing a book on the uprising.

"I think that Nixon and Rockefeller were banking on American belief that if blacks were centrally involved then the incident would be far less tragic," Lynch said.

Rockefeller, who had run against Nixon for the Republican nomination for president in 1968 and became vice president after his resignation, later expressed regret about the way the situation at Attica unfolded.

The three-day conference organized by UB Law Professor Teresa Miller brought together hostage and inmate advocates. The two sides are finally in a position to reach common ground with the passage of time and the ending of legal disputes, Miller said. A 2000 court ruling that gave \$8 million to 502 inmates and their families was followed in 2005 by a \$12 million state settlement with a group of former hostages and families of those killed.

"They're all talking across their differences and coming to an understanding with 40 years of reflection," Miller said.

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