

The occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971 was a way for Indian people (Indian activists) to resist the cultural appropriation of the White race, or as some might say--our White brothers. It was a way to resist and hope for a better future for our people. There were two other attempts to occupy Alcatraz before this last time. This time the occupancy happened.

Alcatraz Island was originally used by Indian people. It was first used as a place of isolation or ostracism for tribal members. However it was also used for camping and gathering foods such as bird eggs and sea life. It wasn't until later that Indian people used the island to escape from the California Mission system. Then in 1850, the U.S. Army turned Alcatraz Island into a powerful fortress in 1850 to protect San Francisco from foreign invaders.

The occupiers held Alcatraz Island for nineteen months, from November 20, 1969 until June 11, 1971, reclaiming it as Indian land and demanding fairness and respect for Indian peoples. Then first occupants took over the island because in 1964 it was declared Federal Surplus which gave them right because of an 1868 treaty which entitled them to take possession of surplus federal land. However this time they wanted to take it over because the American Indian Center had burned down in San Francisco and wanted to use the island for a new facility. "They were an unlikely mix of Indian college activists, families with children fresh of the reservations and urban dwellers disenchanted with what they called the U.S. government's economic, social and political neglect" (Winton, 1).

The occupation of Alcatraz was about human rights, the occupiers said because the U.S. policy toward Indians had worsened, despite repeated pleas from American Indian leaders to honor treaties and tribal sovereignty as well as Indian culture. It was an effort to restore the dignity of the more than five hundred fifty-four American Indian nations in the U.S. As Richard Oakes, the group's leader said to the San Francisco Department of the Interior in a phone message, "We invite the U.S. to acknowledge the justice of our claim. The choice now lies with the leaders of the American government- to use violence upon us as before to remove us from our Great Spirit's land, or to institute a real change in its dealing with the American Indian". Historians and other experts say the occupation-though chaotic and laced with tragedy-improved conditions for the two million American Indians and Alaskan Natives alive today. "Alcatraz was a big enough symbol that for the first time this century Indians were taken seriously," says Vine Deloria Jr.

Alcatraz had changed everything for the Indian people. Although Alcatraz was a former penitentiary, many of those involved in the occupation experienced a feeling of freedom. While they were on the island, they were free from government control and regulation, and free to make their own choices. They wanted to turn the island into an Indian cultural complex as well as a University.

Indians of All Nations, The Alcatraz Proclamation to the Great White Father and His People, felt that the so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. By this, we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that: 1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation. 2. It has no fresh running water. 3. It has

inadequate sanitation facilities. 4. There are no oil or mineral rights. 5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great. 6. There are no health-care facilities. 7. The soil is rocky and nonproductive, and the land does not support game. 8. There are no educational facilities. 9. The population has always exceeded the land base. 10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others. Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

Again the takeover of Alcatraz was one of the most successful American Indian protest actions of the 20th century, fueling the rise of modern Native American activism. It also brought Indian rights issues to the attention of the federal government and American public, changing forever the way Native people viewed themselves, their culture and their inherent right to self-determination. The occupation of Alcatraz not only sparked the American Indian Movement (AIM), but it was also inspired by it. After visiting the occupiers of Alcatraz Island, AIM began a series of national protest actions by seizing federal facilities. Comprised of mostly younger, more progressive and better educated urban Indians, AIM was initially formed to protect urban Indians from civil rights abuses. It was the Native American civil-rights movement, set to encourage self-determination among Native Americans and to establish international recognition of their treaty rights.

Russell Means proudly describes what AIM did for the Indian people by saying, “Before AIM, Indians were dispirited, defeated and culturally dissolving. People were

ashamed to be Indian. You didn't see the young people wearing braids or chokers or ribbon shirts in those days. Hell, I didn't wear 'em. People didn't Sun Dance, they didn't Sweat, they were losing their languages. Then there was that spark at Alcatraz, and we took off. Man, we took a ride across this country. We put Indians and Indian rights smack dab in the middle of the public consciousness for the first time since the so-called Indian Wars...[AIM] laid the groundwork for the next stage in regaining our sovereignty and self-determination as a nation, and I'm proud to have been a part of that".

LaNada Boyer, one of the key coordinators for the occupation described Alcatraz as being symbolic in the rebirth of Indian people to be recognized as a people, as human beings, whereas before, we were not. We were not recognized, we were not legitimate... but we were able to raise, not only the consciousness of other American people, but our own people as well, to reestablish our identity as Indian people, as a culture, as political entities.

On June 11, 1971 FBI agents and U.S. marshals escorted the remaining fifteen occupiers off Alcatraz, ending the nineteen month, nine-day long occupation. However on January 3, 1970 Richard Oakes stepdaughter fell onto a concrete slab and died almost immediately. Oakes and his family left the island for good, creating a leadership void and a power struggle among the remaining occupiers. I feel that if this didn't happen the occupation would have been more successful. The result of the Alcatraz occupation, either directly or indirectly, the official U.S. government policy of termination of Indian tribes was ended, replaced by a policy of Indian self-determination. There was also a new sense of Indianness and pride in being an American Indian in the result of the occupation.