

Whitney White

Professor Fure-Slocum

HIST 183 Final

5/17/06

Hope revealed in Indian people from the American Indian Movement

The American Indian movement [AIM] brought hope to the Indian people during a time of overall despair and cultural assimilation, with its inspiration from the occupancy of Alcatraz Island, fueling the rise of modern Native American activism. The spark of Alcatraz led AIM to become a multi-tribal protest organization during the 1970's beginning with the painting of Plymouth Rock, the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement (ARPM), Trail of Broken Treaties, Wounded Knee II, to the Longest Walk.

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. The first occupants took over the island because in 1964 it was declared Federal Surplus land 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.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

¹ Ben Winton, *Alcatraz: Taking Back the Rock*. (Temecula: Media Concepts, Inc., 1999), pg. 1

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.² 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., a University of Colorado-Boulder law professor, philosopher, author and historian.

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.

John Trudell said, that if you wanted to make it in America as an Indian, you had to become a hollow person and let them (the government and white society) remold you...Alcatraz put me back into my community and helped me remember who I am. It was a rekindling of the spirit³, who came to national prominence in 1969 as a spokesperson for Native Americans who were occupying the Island.

² Winton, *Alcatraz: Taking back the Rock*, 1.

³ Harvey Markowitz, *American Indian Biographies* (Pasadena, CA and Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, Inc., 1999), pg. 373.

Dr. LaNada Boyer 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 as well, to reestablish our identity as Indian people, as a culture, as political entities.

The occupation 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.⁴

The occupation also succeeded in getting the federal government to end its policy of termination and adopt an official policy of Indian self-determination providing hope for the Indian people to look toward a better future. From 1970 to 1971, Congress passed fifty-two legislative proposals on behalf of American Indians to support tribal self-rule.⁵

Again the takeover of Alcatraz was one of the most successful American Indian protest actions of the 20th century, increasing the rise of modern Native American activism.⁶ 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.

When the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960's, American Indian activists joined the struggle.⁷ Facing low incomes, poor housing, and high unemployment, Native peoples in the Twin Cities endured police brutality and harassment. Employing methods used similar to those used by the Black Panther Party in

4 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, produced by Jon Plutte and directed by James Frontier, 60 minutes, PBS, 2002.

5 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

6 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

7 Donald A. Grinde Jr., *American Political History Series: Native Americans* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, a division of Congressional Quarterly, Inc, 2002, pg. 68.

Oakland, California, American Indian leaders in Minneapolis created an “Indian patrol” to shadow activities of the police in the urban Indian community of the Twin Cities. During thirty-nine weeks of Indian patrols in the Twin Cities Indian Ghetto, the arrest rate of Native Americans fell significantly.⁸

In the summer of 1968, as a result of the success of the Indian patrol, Ojibway leaders Dennis Banks and George Mitchell founded the American Indian Movement (AIM). Mitchell, an introspective leader, drafted AIM’s charter, and Banks, a more colorful leader, became the group’s media spokesman.⁹ Other known leaders or founders of AIM are Vernon Bellecourt, Russell Means, and John Trudell.

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.¹⁰ 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

8 Grinde, 185.

9 Grinde, 185.

10 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

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". It shows how it brought a new sense of Indianness and hope to all of the Indian people.

The American Indian Movement's first protest action was on Thanksgiving Day in 1970, when AIM members painted Plymouth Rock red and seized the Mayflower II replica in Plymouth, Massachusetts to challenge a celebration of colonial expansion.¹¹ Russell Means revealed his talent as a media strategist, attracting national attention through actions such as painting Plymouth Rock.¹²

From the takeover of Alcatraz Island in 1969 to the Longest Walk in 1978, the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement (ARPM) used social protests to demand that the government honor treaty obligations by providing resources, education, housing and healthcare to alleviate poverty. The ARPM aimed to build Indian colleges and create Indian studies programs, one of the reasons I pursue to develop my own major, museum and cultural centers with federal funds to redress centuries of cultural repression.¹³ Although Native Americans had participated in social movements throughout the 20th century, the ARPM differed from past movements in that they demanded inclusion in U.S. institutions while retaining their cultural identity. As Indian activism progressed the ARPM became more serious and sometimes violent.¹⁴

In the summer of 1972 several AIM leaders met with traditional elders at the annual Sun Dance on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. At the meeting, the

11 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

12 Harvey Markowitz, *American Indian Biographies* (Pasadena, CA and Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, Inc., 1999), pg. 215.

13 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

14 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

activists received direction from the spiritual leaders. Finding common cause in their distrust of elected tribal governments, the two groups joined forces to nurture a gathering of hundreds of Indians under the banner of the “Trial of Broken Treaties” and to march to Washington in a peaceful and spiritual way. Vernon Bellecourt, the national coordinator of AIM along as one of the founders, volunteered to organize the demonstration.¹⁵

In November 1972, several Native rights organizations staged the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan on the eve of the 1972 presidential election with the intention of presenting President Nixon with a twenty-point program, a list of grievances forming the manifesto for American Indian liberation, redefining U.S.-Indian relations. However before AIM and its supporters made their way to D.C. they stopped in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Dennis Banks talked about Indian grievances and how the government neglected Indian people.¹⁶ The younger generation pumped up for this because they wanted to show their support for their people, so they went to D.C. with the caravan.¹⁷ They decided to celebrate who they were instead of hiding it.

Angered by the lack of logistical support promised by the Interior Department officials, Native American activists took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁸ Making barricades of filing cabinets, office furniture, and copy machines.¹⁹ They protested the negligence’s of the BIA. When the activists left, they took with them files that they later used for documenting BIA malfeasance in the administration of Indian affairs.²⁰

After 1972, the expanding protests of urban Indian groups spread to the

15 Grinde, 186.

16 Winifred Red Cloud, interviewed by author, 16 May 2006.

17 Winifred Red Cloud, interviewed by author, 16 May 2006.

18 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

19 Grinde, 186.

20 Grinde, 187.

reservations and revealed increasing tensions within Indian communities, often characterized as “traditional” versus “assimilated” Indians. Those conflicts came to a head at “Wounded Knee II,” a ten-week siege on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.²¹

When Lakota AIM supporters and activists came back to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, they came back to a war, it was like a “Vietnam in South Dakota”.²² One result of the escalating conflict between Oglala Lakota rationalists allied with the American Indian Movement and Tribal Chairman, Richard “Dick” Wilson was the seventy-one-day occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973.²³ The local context of the occupation included an effort to publically confront Wilson’s policies, which often favored non-Indian ranchers, farmers, and corporations.²⁴ Wilson outfitted a tribal police force that was often called the “goon squad.” This police force--for which “GOON” meant Guardians of the Oglala Nation--was financed with tribal money from the federal government.²⁵ Dick Wilson’s goons inflicted more than sixty deaths on AIM activists during the early 1970’s, a time during which the Pine Ridge Reservation had a higher murder rate than any city in the U.S.²⁶

The conflict at Wounded Knee involved the impeachment of Oglala Lakota’s tribal chairman, Richard Wilson, who was considered corrupt by many elders and traditional members of the tribe, including those associated with AIM. However other tribal members, many of whom were family members and friends who had received the

21 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

22 Winifred Red Cloud, interviewed by author, 16 May 2006.

23 Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde Jr., *The Encyclopedia of Native American Biography*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1997). Pg. 402.

24 Johansen and Grinde Jr., pg. 402.

25 Johansen and Grinde Jr., pg. 402.

26 Johansen and Grinde Jr., pg. 34.

few jobs and resources the tribal government had to offer, supported Wilson. The two opposing factions armed themselves and a standoff ensued, involving tribal police, AIM, people living on the reservation, federal law enforcement officials, the BIA, celebrities, philanthropic, religious and legal organizations, the U.S. military and the news media.²⁷

Convinced that the occupation would lead to a fatal confrontation, AIM leader Russell Means said, “I hope by my death, and the deaths of these Indian men and women, there will be an investigation into corruption on the reservations and there’s no better place to start than Pine Ridge.”²⁸ The siege ended on May 9 after negotiations between President Nixon’s representative Leonard Garment and AIM leaders Dennis Banks and Carter Camp.²⁹ Wounded Knee showed the American society and the world what was going on in this world with the Oglala Lakota people.³⁰

The last major event of the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement was The Longest Walk from February to July 1978. Several hundred Native Americans marched from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. to symbolize the forced removal of American Indians from their homelands and to draw attention to the continuing problems plaguing the Indian community. The march also attempted to call attention to backlash against Indian treaty rights that was gaining momentum in Congress. Unlike many protest events in the mid-70’s, the walk was a peaceful event.³¹

The Alcatraz-Red Power Movement declined in the late 70’s, due to large part to the FBI’s suppression, but it accomplished many of its goals. By the early 1980’s, over one hundred Indian studies programs had been created in the United States. Tribal

27 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

28 Grinde, pg. 187.

29 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

30 Winifred Red Cloud, interviewed by author, 16 May 2006.

31 *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

museums opened, and the United Nations recognized an international indigenous rights movement. AIM continued fighting for Indian rights in land and grazing rights battles; protesting athletic team Indian mascots; and working for the repatriation of sacred objects taken from Indian land.³²

To show support for the hopefulness the occupiers of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971, Indian people have gathered on Alcatraz Island on what is called “Un-Thanksgiving Day” to honor the occupation and those who continue to fight for Native American rights today every November since 1975.

The American Indian Movement led to the current existence of hope and pride today in being Indian. I can say this because I myself find pride in being Native American. We celebrate who we are instead of hiding it. I feel that a lot of hopefulness was brought to the Indian people by the American Indian Movement with its ideals and by its leaders, activist, and supporters. Indian people just forgot how important it was to be Indian and the American Indian Movement woke them up, and mad them realize the importance of participating to help you fellow people out, in hopes that things will get better for all of the Indian people.

Even when AIM activist faced personal tragedies they continue to remain activist for this cause for better treatment of their people. As an example, John Trudell faced personal tragedy in 1979 when his wife, three children, and mother-in-law were killed in an arson fire at their home on the Duck Valley Reservation in Nevada. The crime was never solved, and many Native American activist--including Trudell himself--believed the fire was set as an act of retribution for Trudell’s outspoken stands on issues affecting Native Americans. The fire occurred less than a day after he had burned the American

³² *Alcatraz Is Not An Island*, PBS, 2002.

Flag while protesting in Washington, D.C. Even after the loss of his family, Trudell remained hopeful, and continued to be active in AIM through the 1990's.³³

Throughout AIM there emerged an AIM song, a Ojibway man had a dream and the song came to him. They started singing the song during protests and demonstrations. It song itself got people involved because it reminded people of their culture, and the reasons for why they felt they had to stand up to the government in order to receive appropriate rights. When protesting it brought hope to the people itself because brought back to cultural ties. It was basically a victory song with no meaning of words, its just contemporary, and usually sung after each successful protest, and people would get up and dance.³⁴ So it brought hope to the Indian people.

Today with the ownership of casinos has also brought hope to the Indian people because they now have the money and resources to fight mistreatments, etc in court. These tribes have the resources to fight in legal battles, whereas before they didn't. So now with these resources Indian people have a better chance of shielding themselves by mistreatment of the government.

³³ Markowitz, Pg. 373.

³⁴ Winifred Red Cloud, interviewed by author, 16 May 2006.

Bibliography

Alcatraz Is Not An Island. Produced by Jon Plutte. Directed by James Fortier. 60 minutes. PBS, 2002.

Grinde Jr., Donald A. *American Political History Series: Native Americans*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, a division of Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2002.

Infoplease. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 6th Edition: American Indian Movement*. Columbia University Press, 2006. <<http://www.infoplease.com/search.php3?query=American+Indian+Movement&In=all&x=0&y=0>>

Johansen, Bruce E. and Grinde Jr., Donald A. *The Encyclopedia of Native American Biography*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1997.

Johnson, Troy. *Introduction: Alcatraz*. Long Beach: Troy Johnson, 1995. <<http://www.csulb.edu/~gcampus/libarts/am-indian/alcatraz/>>

Klein, Barry T. *Reference Encyclopedia of the American Indian: 7th Edition*. West Nyack, NJ: Todd Publications, 1995.

Markowitz, Harvey. *American Indian Biographies*. Pasadena, CA and Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, Inc., 1999.

Pritzker, Barry M. *Native American Today: A Guide to Commentary Politics and Culture*. Santa Barbara: ABC- CLIO, Inc., 1999.

Red Cloud, Winifred. Interviewed by Whitney White. 16 May 2006.

Winton, Ben. *Alcatraz: Taking Back The Rock*. Temecula: Media Concepts Group, Inc., 1999.