THE EFFICACY OF THE RED POWER MOVEMENT

Kelly Rios

When forty Native Americans first invaded the vacant island of Alcatraz in 1964 as an act of protest, they used their culture effectively to raise public awareness. Captured photographically by the press in their traditional Indian costume, the symbolic act of land reclamation by the protesters caught the attention and sympathies of the American public. Adam Fortunate Eagle admits the spectacle was theater.[1] Although their stay on the island lasted only four hours before the acting warden ushered them off, the brief moment of theatrics garnered worldwide attention and the sympathies of the American public as the events were broadcast on the evening news and reported in the morning paper. For decades, Native Americans had silently navigated the red-taped laden channels of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The invasion, as a form of guerilla theater, a type of militant or revolutionary protest that capitalized on the irony of the situation, reminded the American public of the Indians' existence.

Native Americans knew that once they gained the sympathies of the American public, government policy makers would feel pressure to revisit the plight of the American Indian. Thus the stage was set for the Red Power Movement. In 1969, Native Americans once again staged a hostile takeover of Alcatraz, only this time their stay lasted nineteen months versus four hours as in the first attempt.

[1] Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 43.

Organized by a group known as Indians of All Tribes, the occupation of Alcatraz became the first event in series of many dramatic protests to bring together Indians from different tribes. These carefully, and not so carefully, staged demonstrations continued throughout the early 1970s and included such acts as the occupation of the BIA, Washington D.C., in November of 1972 and the seizure of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973. Aside from the demonstration at Alcatraz, most of the acts were led by the American Indian Movement (AIM), a group that would later come under fire by the U.S. government after being classified as domestic terrorists. Native Americans demanded greater self-determination as well as reforms within the BIA. They sought a preservationist approach over assimilation. Rather than terminate Indian tribes, they wanted to see colleges, museums and programs established that preserved Indian culture within existing U.S. institutional frameworks. Historians and Native Americans dispute the effectiveness of these demonstrations and militant actions. Some feel that the radical actions taken by AIM did not have the support of the entire Native American population. However, the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act of 1975 has a number of historians supporting the notion that the radical political action taken by AIM was indeed effective. My research of newspaper coverage of the events confirms that despite creating divisions within the Native American community, the guerilla theater protests of the Red Power Movement yielded positive changes and reform in Indian policy by appealing to the sympathies of the American public.

Throughout the 1950s the U.S. government pursued a policy of Termination in regards to Native Americans. Indians had been encouraged by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to relocate from reservations to large U.S. cities in an attempt to assimilate them into mainstream society, thus, "terminating" tribal associations. Between 1952 and 1960, the BIA relocated more than 35,000 Indians to cities such as Denver, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and San Francisco.[2] Unable to find decent housing or employment, a third returned to the reservation. Although those who stayed found themselves living a lonely existence dependent on government assistance, they found

[2] Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 8.

this to be a better alternative to life on the reservation where the average male life expectancy was less than forty-five years.[3] As more Indians began to make the urban transition, the transplanted citizens began to form a community. This community enabled them to hold onto their traditions and to provide support for one another. In California's Bay Area, based at a center in San Francisco, this community proved to be a healthy alternative to the neighborhood bars that many had previously frequented. The centers aided in the formation of a more cohesive Native American community.[4]

As a community of transplanted Indians formed in San Francisco, Native Americans elsewhere in the country became increasingly aware of the shortcomings of the government's Termination policy. Clyde Warrior, leader of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) in the early 1960s, began giving a voice to the new Indian policy of self-determination.[5] Warrior felt that the only way Indians would overcome the poverty and desperate conditions that had plagued them, was if they took charge of their own destiny. Warrior suggested that Indians needed programs that were "Indian creations, Indian choices, Indian experiences" rather than programs that were a part of Johnson's War on Poverty campaign. He even felt that "the failures must be Indian experiences" in order to gain an understanding of what caused the failure.[6] Warrior was part of a larger group of young Native American college students who formed the crux of the Red Power Movement. This group was comprised of those Indians who upon returning from Vietnam took advantage of their GI Bill educational benefits as well as those who were a part of the relocation efforts underway by the BIA.

On November 20, 1969, a radical phase in Indian activism began with the takeover of Alcatraz Island by a group, led by twenty-seven year old Mohawk Indian and college student, Richard Oakes, that referred to itself as Indians of All Tribes.[7] As one of the

[3] Ward Churchill, "The Bloody Wake of Alcatraz: Political Repression of he American Indian Movement During the 1970's," in *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk,* eds. Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 244.

[4] Ibid., 10.

[5] Ibid., 45.

[6] Ibid., 55.

[7] Indian of All Tribes, *Alcatraz is Not an Island,* ed. Peter Blue Cloud (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1972), 15.

first overtly radical acts of protest, the frustrations and goals of Native Americans took shape and the agenda for the Red Power Movement began to write itself. For the first time, Indians crossed not only tribal barriers but geographic boundaries as well to protest the marginalized place in society held by Native Americans. In the "Proclamation To The Great White Father and All His People" delivered by the Indians of All Tribes upon the start of their occupation, the protesters explained that the takeover of Alcatraz was in actuality a reclamation of land that was rightfully theirs. Capitalizing on the irony of their situation, they pointed out that many of the characteristics of Alcatraz were similar to those of reservations and therefore suitable for Indian habitation. They listed the following ten points:

> It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
>
> It has no fresh running water.
>
> It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
>
> There are no oil or mineral rights.
>
> There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
>
> There are no health care facilities.
>
> The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
>
> There are no educational facilities.
>
> The population has always exceeded the land base.
>
> The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.[8]

The Proclamation effectively encapsulated all of the frustrations that had been mounted against the United States government and its Termination policy. The refusal of Native Americans to trade in their heritage as part of the assimilation process is evident in how the Indians intended to make use of Alcatraz. They planned to develop centers for Native American Studies, American Indian Spiritualism, Indian Ecology as well as an Indian Training School and an American Indian Museum. The invasion at Alcatraz, as

[8] Ibid., 41.

explained by the Indians in their proclamation, demonstrates the Indians' desire to have control over their own programs in a place that was theirs.[9] More importantly, this moment is pointed to as the first time Indians from across the country came together and formed a joint agenda. Oakes pointed out that Alcatraz served as "a place where [they could] polarize [their] grievances and see if [they] could find a solution for them."[10] This agenda, highlighting the need for Indian institutions while alluding to the need for self-determination, served as the basis for the activist movement of the 1970s.

Adam Fortunate Eagle notes in his autobiographical account about the occupation of Alcatraz that gaining the support of a sympathetic press was a critical factor in appealing to the American public, which would in turn result in success in Washington.[11] Therefore, aside from other Indians, the protesters only allowed the press on the island during the takeover. Throughout the duration of the occupation, the *Los Angeles Times* published numerous articles highlighting the desperate conditions of Native Americans in the United States. On December 2, 1969 for example, an article titled "The 'Lesson' of Alcatraz" provided the grim statistics of reservation life for readers.[12] At the same time, the American public began to show support for Native Americans by donating food, water, and clothing that sustained Indians during their nineteen-month long stay on Alcatraz. And within just a month of the takeover ten thousand dollars had been donated to their cause.[13] The sympathetic sentiments of the public as expressed through the media and through their donations had an impact on politicians as well.

The response from the Nixon administration and California legislators makes the effectiveness of the nineteen-month takeover evident. Once the public began to express sympathy for the Indians, politicians expressed similar sentiments. U.S. Senator for California, George Murphy, changed his stance from one of criticism to one of support and vowed to assist the Indians in finding a location for a cultural center.[14] By January 15, 1971, the government donated six

[9] Ibid., 45.

[10] "This Time It's the Palefaces Who Bring Turkey to Indians," *Los Angeles Times,* November 28, 1969, 3.

[11] Eagle, 63.

[12] "The 'Lesson' of Alcatraz," *Los Angeles Times,* December 2, 1969, B6.

[13] Daryl Lembke, "Alcatraz Now Symbol of Liberty," *Los Angeles Times,* December 21, 1969, CB.

[14] Ibid.

hundred forty acres of surplus federal land located outside of Davis, California, to the Indians for a new university.[15] At the federal level, Vice President Spiro Agnew renounced Termination as official policy. Agnew explained in a speech that "rather than 'termination' our policy is that the right of choice of the Indian people will be respected."[16] Additionally, Agnew encouraged President Nixon to make a public statement announcing the Administration's shift away from Termination. Nixon explained in his Indian message of July 8, 1970 that Termination was not only "morally and legally unacceptable," but that "self-determination among Indian people can and must be encouraged without the threat of eventual termination."[17] Within a year of the first joint act of protest, Native Americans began to have an impact on federal policy. Not only was the condition of Indians in the United States brought to the attention of all Americans, but also the policy of Termination as a solution was publicly recognized as a failure.

At the same time, as Indians of All Tribes staked their claim at Alcatraz, the American Indian Movement began to gain momentum in Minnesota. Started by Dennis Banks in July 1968, AIM's top priority had been to protect the Indians of Minneapolis from police brutality and racism. While AIM's first meeting boasted an attendance of two hundred people, by 1973 their membership grew to five thousand along with the establishment of seventy-nine chapters across the country. [18] The group was primarily made up of college educated urban Indians who were particularly skilled in gaining the media attention by way of guerilla theater.[19] Despite not being directly involved in the occupation of Alcatraz, members of AIM recognized the significance of the event as an opportunity for

[15] "Indians Given Permit for Use of Army Land," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1971, 18.

[16] Spiro Agnew, "Statement of the Vice President, National Council on Indian Opportunity," as cited by Dean J. Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest," *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (2003), 208.

[17] Richard Nixon, "Special Message to Congress on Indian Affairs," as cited by Kotlowski, 209.

[18] Dennis Banks, *Ojibwa Warrior* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 61.

[19] Troy Johnson, Duane Champagne, and Joane Nagel, "American Indian Activism and Transformation: Lessons From Alcatraz" in *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk, 9-44,* ed. Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 34.

future action. AIM, effective in disseminating communication throughout the Native American community, proved to play an important role in organizing protest events. AIM's organizational capabilities, coupled with their power to manipulate the media (thus capturing the interest of the American public), led them to take center stage in the Red Power Movement and took on the role of national activists.[20] The media attention given to AIM and their protests often gave the impression that their tactics and ideas were representative of the entire Native American population; however, this was in fact not the case. As the American Red Power Movement of the 1970s continued, the divisions between AIM and other Native Americans grew deeper, especially as the events grew more violent.

In November of 1972, AIM helped to organize a protest known as the Trail of Broken Treaties. AIM leaders felt the existing paternal relationship between the BIA and the Indians prevented them from "getting out from under the heel of the government."[21] The event intended to bring hundreds of Indians from across the country to Washington D.C. for a week of staged events meant to highlight both the culture of Native Americans as well as the many injustices inflicted upon them since the arrival of the Europeans. There were also plans to present a document that had become known as the Twenty Points. The document was "partly idealism, partly a magnificent attempt to draw the United States into a new paradigm of dealing with Indian nations."[22] However, after a series of miscommunications and poor organization, the Indians found themselves in Washington D.C. involved in a hostile takeover of the BIA.

Originally, local accommodations for the Indians had been secured at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church by the BIA. The Indians soon discovered after their arrival that the lodgings were infested with rats.[23] The protesters felt as though the church was just another example of BIA ineptitude and thus proceeded quickly to march over to the BIA headquarters to demand better accommodations.[24] In an effort to appease the Indians, bureaucrats at the BIA attempted to

[20] Ibid.
[21] Banks, 126.
[22] Smith, 144.
[23] Banks, 130.
[24] Ibid.

secure housing for them at various other churches and government auditoriums for the week.[25] At this point, the years of frustration felt by many Native Americans towards the BIA left them disillusioned. While the leaders of AIM expressed their concerns with the bureaucrats of the BIA, a steady flow of Indians began to infiltrate the building resulting in a hostile takeover. The occupation is often pointed to as a crucial turning point in the Red Power Movement. Not only did the event highlight the radical and violent tendencies of AIM, it also proved to be a moment that further divided the radical militants of AIM from other Native American activists.

Although AIM had always carried militant undertones to all of its protests, the BIA occupation was seen as especially destructive, both in the physical damage inflicted upon the headquarters and in the public image of AIM and the Native American message. According to a U.S. Congressional report, the occupiers of the BIA caused over two million dollars in damage.[26] The pictures in the Congressional report show destruction on a massive scale. There were overturned file cabinets from which the contents were strewn about; broken windows, damaged furniture, and numerous Molotov cocktails in front of graffiti filled walls.[27] The violent and extensive damage revealed in the pictures shows the deep rooted rage and frustration that many Native Americans felt towards the BIA. Additionally, the pictures were visual evidence of how militant AIM had become. These images became imprinted on the minds of the American public rather than the initial reasons for the gathering.[28] Now seen as radical revolutionaries or militants, AIM began to lose the support and sympathies of the American public and further alienated themselves from the Native American community.

The occupation of the BIA was seen as a distinct moment that separated AIM from other Native American groups. As an activist group, AIM had gained notoriety by utilizing radical tactics to bring attention to Native American issues. Despite the effectiveness of these measures as evident in the invasion of Alcatraz, some Native American groups such as the National Congress of American

[25] Smith, 156.

[26] U.S. Congress, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, *Revolutionary Activities within the United States: The American Indian Movement,* 94th Cong., 2nd sess., 1976, 10.

[27] U.S. Congressional report 11-17.

[28] Smith, 167.

Indians (NCAI) found the tactics to be too radical. The NCAI was a group comprised of elected tribal officials, headed by Charles E. Trimble, who preferred to use channels established by the government and the BIA as a way to lobby for change. Not only did the radical nature of AIM result in the NCAI not taking part in the Trail of Broken Treaties protest, it left Trimble trying to distinguish the NCAI from AIM in the press. He claimed that "their tactics can only serve to further polarize the Indian community of this nation and sever that thread of hope that is the common cause of justice for all Indian people."[29] In fact, many Native Americans felt that AIM did not speak for all Native Americans and was instead an extremely radical organization.[30] The damage inflicted at the BIA widened the chasm between the urban radicals and elected tribal leaders all taking part in the Red Power Movement.

The Red Power Movement fracture, coupled with the destruction created by AIM, is the point at which historians begin to question the efficacy of the movement. In addition to the physical damage done at the BIA, the protesters stole over twenty thousand pounds of government documents as well.[31] The members of AIM who took the files saw this as an opportunity to inform tribes as well as the public about the wrongdoings of the BIA.[32] However, historians such as Paul Chaat Smith claim that the real damage was inflicted upon the tribes. He argues that "the big losers…would be the tribes who relied on government records to press for land claims and other issues."[33] This would allow the BIA to assert that documents were missing in future land claims even if that was not true. Additionally, he argues that the occupation of the BIA only resulted in Native Americans getting gas money home, while others argue that the panel appointed by the Nixon administration was in fact a victory.[34] It is true that officials at the BIA gave sixty-six thousand dollars to the activists for transportation home in an effort to evacuate the building. However, in addition to gas money, the Nixon administration opened communication to hear the grievances

[29] "Damage to Capital Building by Indians Put at $1.98 Million," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1972, 2.
[30] U.S. Congressional report, 2.
[31] Ibid., 171.
[32] Ibid., 172.
[33] Ibid., 173.
[34] Ibid., 165.

of the Indians. Officials from the Office of Management and Budget reviewed "treaties, religious freedom, restoration of Indian lands, and increased funds for education and health care."[35] Therefore, it appears as though the occupation of the BIA did yield results for the activists. The original protesters had intended to get an Administrative audience to hear their grievances. In an effort to regain control of the BIA, officials from the Administration did open up negotiations and listened to what the protesters had to say.

Perhaps the final scene of guerrilla theater, or radical activism, took place on the Pine Ridge Reservation at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. In February of 1973, AIM leaders responded to a call for their assistance in staging a protest against the tribal council in Pine Ridge. Many of the Indians on the reservation had become frustrated with the corruption taking place in the tribal council as exemplified by allegations of voting fraud in a recent impeachment trial.[36] Coupled with the corrupted tribal council were desperate reservation conditions. Rolland Dewing points out the factors that contributed to the Pine Ridge tinderbox,

Pine Ridge contained all the ingredients for a political explosion in 1972. Although it is the second largest reservation in area in the United States, its 15,000 people were mostly unemployed and impoverished. The normal rate of unemployment hovered at over 50 percent and it was not uncommon in bad times to see it go up to over 70 percent. Income per capita usually rates lowest in the nation. Very few communications such as regular newspaper or reservation radio station existed. All of the barometers of living standards such as life expectancy, income, disease rate, suicide rate, housing, and social values were appalling.[37]

Rather than invade the Pine Ridge tribal council building, a decidedly predictable move, they used the historically significant Wounded Knee battlefield as their stage to make for a more powerful statement.[38] In addition to holding eleven hostages, what followed was an armed three- month long standoff in which two Indians and one FBI agent were killed.[39] This armed standoff

[35] Kotlowski, 211.
[36] Banks, 158.
[37] Rolland Dewing, *Wounded Knee: The Meaning and Significance of the Second Incident* (New York: Irvington, 1985), 71.
[38] Banks, 161.
[39] Johnson, 36.

continued to distinguish AIM and its tactics as a radical faction of the whole Native American activist movement, thus, further alienating itself from the Native American population.

Despite the negative turn that AIM had taken in relation to both the Native American population and the American public as a whole, the occupation of Wounded Knee resulted in political gains. First, as Dean J. Kotlowski argues, the selection of Wounded Knee as the location of the takeover had tremendous symbolic significance. By choosing a location that historically symbolized the mistreatment of Indians by whites, AIM attempted to appeal to public sympathies. Subsequently, the heightened awareness limited how aggressive the FBI could be in ending the standoff. As a result, both President Nixon and military leaders declared that there was to be no bloodshed and that waiting out the occupation would be best. This heightened awareness also aided in the events that took place after the occupation. Not only did federal officials offer affirmation for continued support for self-determination, but legislation supporting this also began to move through Congress. Among these bills was the Indian Financing Act of 1974, allowing tribes to utilize a revolving fund for monetary loans, as well as the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, which called for federal agencies to contract out services to Indian tribes. The law also gave greater autonomy to tribes over their schools.[40] The continued passage of bills supporting Native Americans in the wake of the Wounded Knee occupation illustrates the efficacy of AIM's tactics and its use of guerilla theater. Despite their violent tendencies and radical tactics, the activists helped Native Americans achieve greater self-control as part of the larger agenda.

The guerilla theater tactics employed by both Indians of All Tribes and AIM as part of the Red Power Movement in the 1970s resulted in heightened public awareness of Native American issues. Often, by capitalizing on the irony of a situation or location, demonstrators made poignant statements regarding the unfortunate state of Indians that appealed to the sympathies of the American public. This sympathy proved to be crucial in forcing the U.S. government to recognize the failures of Termination and relocation. Recognizing both as failed policies led the government to address inadequacies within the BIA and the established system and work towards rectifying those shortcomings. The result was the passage

[40] Kotlowski, 217.

of a series of bills in Congress that ultimately led to the passage of the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975.