

Recognition Deserved:  
The Impacts of the Native American Occupation of Alcatraz 1969-1971

*“The opposition to the Indians is a monstrosity which cannot be beaten in a single action, unless we as Indian people could literally rise up, in unison, and take what is ours by force... We know the odds are against us, but we also realize that we are fighting for the lives of future Indian generations... We are convinced, more than ever, that this is a real war. No people in this World ever has been exterminated without putting up a last resistance. The Indians are gathering!” Eagle Adam Fortunate.<sup>1</sup>*

During the sixties in the U.S. social movements peaked, but Indian activism in America was still searching for its path in gaining sovereign rights for all the Native Americans. Reservations terminated and Indians relocated fueled the Native American’s desire to partake in the activism inspired in the urban cities. The Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 was a monumental moment in Native American history where Indians were a force to be reckoned with and the unity amongst natives could be seen all over the country. Compared to other events in Indian activism, the Alcatraz occupation is rarely discussed and I am asking why. This paper will strive to answer that question while refraining from focusing on the more popular movements of Native American activism. Using the native lens, I will illustrate how the Occupation of Alcatraz paved the way for other Indian protests and demonstrations. Also, this paper suggests that due to the Alcatraz occupation governmental policies towards Indians and the approach to handling Indian activism were radically transformed. In addition, this paper argues that the more successful Indian activist movements were the ones who emulated the tactics and ideas of the leaders of the Occupation of Alcatraz.

The Occupation of Alcatraz and its importance are debated amongst historians. Historians

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Eagle Adam Fortunate that is found in his book *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!: the Indian Occupation of 1969-1971*. (Heyday Books, 1992), but also Troy R. Johnson uses the quote in his book *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self Determination*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), as does Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior in their book, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. (New York: New York Press 1996).

such as Troy R. Johnson believe that “The events on Alcatraz marked the beginning of a national Indian activist movement... that kept national attention on Indian rights and grievances.”<sup>2</sup> Other historians devote much of their work to the later movements/takeovers like the B.I.A. takeover, Wounded Knee 2, Taos Pueblo’s claim to the area surrounding Blue Lake in New Mexico, and Alaskan Land claims, which suggest that they do not feel Alcatraz is as important.<sup>3</sup> Few historians have dedicated entire books or articles about The Occupation of Alcatraz, which cause difficulties in presenting new or additional information on the demonstration. What many fail to realize, is that since Alcatraz there has been over seventy Indian occupations. All those occupations had members of Alcatraz involved in them some way or another, whether by planning or actively participating in the demonstration. From hearing, reading, and watching Native American testimony on activism it seems that many of them begin with Alcatraz. Though not every Native American activist was present on the island, a clear and overwhelming reality is that they all were impacted by the Alcatraz occupation.

### **Troubled Beginnings and Broken Promises**

To understand why the Native Americans chose Alcatraz we must first dive into the usages and importance of the island to the indigenous people. The Ohlone people lived in the bay area long before the arrival of the first Europeans. The island was not a place where the Natives lived because of the rugged landscape. Rather it was a place where natives traveling by canoe through the treacherous waters could rest and gather themselves before continuing to their

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<sup>2</sup> Troy R. Johnson “Roots of Contemporary Native American Activism” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* Vol. 20 No. 2 (1996) 128.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars who focus on Alcatraz evenly along with other later Indian activist demonstrations in articles or books: Dean J. Kotlowski, “Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest” *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 72 No.2.; Forbes, Jack D., *Native Americans and Nixon: Presidential Politics and Minority self-determination, 1969-1972*, Native American Politics Series, No. 2 Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center 1981.; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*. Troy R Johnson, in two different scholarly works states the importance of Alcatraz and focuses his time primarily on the occupation; Johnson, *The American Indian*, and Johnson, “Roots.”

ultimate destination.<sup>4</sup> Some historians believe that the island was also used, for gathering bird eggs or sea life.<sup>5</sup> According to Troy R. Johnson, indigenous people also used the island “as a place of isolation and ostracism for those who had violated laws or taboos.”<sup>6</sup> The island would serve a different purpose to the Native Americans in the twentieth century. The utilization of specific treaties made it possible for Indians from all tribes to justify their return to the island and attempt to take ownership of the land.

Since the mid 1800’s the United States has made treaties with Native Americans in order to protect remaining Indian land, water, and rights. Unfortunately for the Native Americans, those treaties have been continually broken over time by U.S. citizens, military leaders, and governmental officials; forcing new treaties to be proposed to take place of the old ones. One of the ironic aspects of the treaty making is that, for the most part, Native Americans did not part take in the writing of treaties. Senator William Stewart attempted to say “We have got to catch him [the Indian] first, put a hat on him, clothe him, give him a little whisky and then we make a treaty!”<sup>7</sup> This, however, is not true of how treaty signing went but the image he created with this statement was a strong factor in interpreting future Indian negotiations.<sup>8</sup> As treaties were discussed, debated, and developed, the idea “extermination” was already widely accepted and began destroying Indian and American relations.

“Extermination” was an idea brought to the attention of the federal government by the first Governor of California, Peter Burnett, and in his message to the California State legislature

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<sup>4</sup> Wilma Mankiller, *MANKILLER: A Chief and Her People*. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1993) pg 186.

<sup>5</sup> Mankiller, 186; and Troy R. Johnson, *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self Determination*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996) 2.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *The American Indian*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jill St. Germain, *Indian Treaty- Making Policy in United States and Canada 1867-1877*, (University of Nebraska Press: 2001)17, Quote from Senator William Stewart that was originally said at *Congressional Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., July 14, 1870, Vol. 42, p. 5585.

<sup>8</sup> Germain, 17.

he said “Our American experience has demonstrated the fact that two races cannot live in the same vicinity in peace.”<sup>9</sup> Burnett went on to explicitly state “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races, until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. population had mixed feelings towards native relations because of some governmental leaders having such a negative outlook towards natives. Even with those negative perspectives surfacing, from 1867 to 1868 a series of treaties were passed that dealt with the returning of surplus land to Native Americans, in order to attempt to create peace between natives and Americans.<sup>11</sup>

One of the treaties signed at that time, Treaty of Fort Laramie, was referenced by Native Americans during all three occupations of Alcatraz and would be their tool for continual returns. The treaty stated that any unused, surplus land could be reverted back to the control of the Sioux Indian tribe.<sup>12</sup> Although the treaties had been put into affect many governmental officials did not care for the treaties or abide by them. General John Pope, departmental commander of Division of the Missouri, bluntly stated “I do not consider the treaties, lately made with the Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches worth the paper they are written on.”<sup>13</sup> Treaties were disregarded by Americans during the nineteenth century as much as they were in the twentieth. A common justification for the disregarding of those treaties by governmental leaders was, since we are moving the Indians off reservations and placing them into urban cities, the treaties signed with the native tribes would no longer stand because the reservation system was being destroyed and the new policy of “Termination” would be put into action. This moment called for natives to assert themselves, leading them to display their dissatisfaction with the

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<sup>9</sup> First California Governor Peter Burnett in his Message to the California State Legislature 1851.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Burnett cont.

<sup>11</sup> Germain, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, “Roots,” 236.

government at the Occupation of Alcatraz.

### **“Save the Man, Kill the Indian”**

Federal policy makers have always viewed Indians as a “problem,” and their stance on Indian policy would change over time. Through the years, Indian policy transformed from “assimilation,” to “termination“, and eventually to “self- determination.”<sup>14</sup> Franklin Roosevelt was one of the only presidents, besides Nixon, who were more understanding and excepting of the Native Americans. While FDR was in office he reverted away from previous Indian policy and introduced “The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934,” which restored limited tribal power over intertribal matter.<sup>15</sup> However, President Harry S. Truman’s went away from his predecessor’s ideas and began to change federal Indian in his own way with the policy of termination. Truman, however, did not look upon natives as a priority. The focus of the federal government was dealing with World War Two and the events after the war.<sup>16</sup> During President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s stay in office, the termination policy was actually first brought to the table.<sup>17</sup> The policy itself was to remove the reservation system and move Indians into cities and provide them with better opportunities in education, employment, and prosperity.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Germain, 30.

<sup>14</sup> “Assimilation” was the introduction of Boarding schools for Native Americans in attempt to take the youths and teach them “American” values such as the language, religion, reading, and writing; while at the same time distancing the gap between the youth from their traditional Indian language, relatives, religion, and way of life. “Termination” is described by Troy R. Johnson in his book, *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self Determination* page 33 and 34, as Indians would lose their tax-exempt status of their lands; federal responsibility for their economic and social well-being would be terminated; and Indian tribes themselves would be effectively destroyed. “Self-Determination” is an elastic term but Troy R. Johnson also defines the term in Indian terms as, the right to assume control over their own lives independent of federal control, the creation of conditions for a new era in which the Indian future would be determined by Indian acts and Indian decision, and the assurance that Indian people would not be separated involuntarily from their tribal groups.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Coughlin, “Un-reconciled History: American Indians and the United States,” *American Indian Resource Center*, Huntington Park Public Library.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, “Roots“, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. ( Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 1986)7.

<sup>18</sup> Defined in both of the following scholarly works: Donald L. Fixico, *Termination*. and Johnson “Roots”.

termination policy led to the relocation program. During the relocation period, hundreds of thousands of Indians were taken off the reservations and plugged into mainstream urban societies. One of the main relocation areas was San Francisco.

The idea of termination and relocation had the external appearance of being beneficial for the Indians but in reality the goal was simple “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.”<sup>19</sup> Though life on the reservations may not have been the pristine place to live due to lack of running water, electricity, and poverty, the introduction into cities had immense effect on the psyche of the Native Americans and would create a separation between them and their culture.

The confusing sounds and lights of the cities disturbed the outraged and misplaced Native Americans. Adapting to urban cities was much harder than many Indians anticipated, which caused many of the relocated Indians to return to their respective reservations.<sup>20</sup> Although the idea of providing jobs and housing for Indians sounded good initially, eventually would prove to further diminish the pride of the American Indian. James Welch, a native writer, expressed how he felt in the city by saying “I was as distant from myself as the moon from the earth.”<sup>21</sup> Urban life would also create a new set of problems that were ignored while the Indians were on reservations.

Once in the cities, the emergence of the poor Indian was not only a stereotype, but also a reality. A Senate subcommittee in 1968 released a statement saying:

“50,000 Indian families live in unsanitary, dilapidated dwellings, many in huts, or shanties, even abandoned automobiles...The unemployment rate among Indians was 40%, more than ten times the national average; the average age of death for American

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<sup>19</sup> A phrase that was developed during the time of Assimilation due to the public’s sickness of the Civil War’s bloodshed. The idea behind it was to “Civilize and Christianize” the savages. This phrase was later adopted by the terminationist.

<sup>20</sup> Mankiller 74.

Indians was 44 years and for all other Americans 65 years; infant mortality was twice the national average...”<sup>22</sup>

The training Indians were promised to be able to work certain jobs was supposed to last three months, but ended up lasting three weeks in many cases.<sup>23</sup> Many of the older Indians did not want to leave the reservations in fear of the change that would damage them culturally, physically, and psychologically. Earl Old Person, a native who was a member of the Nation Congress of American Indians, said:

“It is important to note that in our language... the only translation for termination is ‘wipe out’ or ‘kill off’. We have no ... words for termination... Why is it so important that Indians be brought into the ‘mainstream’ of American life? The closest I would be able to come to ‘mainstream’ would be to say, in [my language], ‘a big, wide river.’ Am I to tell my people that they will be thrown into the Big, Wide River of the United States?”<sup>24</sup>

Also, veterans who returned home from war could not imagine moving back to reservation life where there was no electricity and running water.<sup>25</sup> The returning Indian veterans had already become accustomed to mainstream life and wanted the same for their families. Those Indian veterans, however, faced their own set of problems when in the cities. They faced the torment for their involvement in an unjust war and they faced the discrimination for being Indian.<sup>26</sup> Richard McKenzie, one of the Sioux Natives who participated in the 1964 occupation of Alcatraz, had this to say about cities: “I think I would just as soon stay on the reservation, and be poor as to move to a city on relocation and have to live in a ghetto, and that is exactly where

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 73.

<sup>22</sup> Eagle Adam Fortunate. *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!: the Indian Occupation of 1969-1971*. (Heyday Books, 1992) 19.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, “Roots,” 130.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. (New York: New York Press 1996) Quote from Earl Old Person 8.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, “Roots,” 130.

they put us.”<sup>27</sup> Depression set in amongst many of those who decided to stay in the cities and the over consumption of alcohol became another problem for the urban Indians.<sup>28</sup> It was the youth who were intrigued by mainstream life consisting of: plumbing systems, running electricity, cars, telephones, and most importantly the opportunity for a better education.

### **“The Indians Are Gathering”**

The education the young Indians would eventually receive was a key proponent in the natives’ quest in asserting agency, which would become evident in the birth of Indian activism in the late 1960’s. After years of being lied to and deceived, natives began to assert themselves to the issues that mattered most. One of the earliest Native American protest groups was the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).<sup>29</sup> The NCAI used lobbying as the tool of choice. While other social movements were staging sit-ins, natives were staging fish-ins. When Washington State decided to no longer allow Native Americans to fish specific bodies of water, the National Indian Youth Council began to use fish-ins to protect their fishing rights that were promised to the them by the treaties previously signed with the federal government<sup>30</sup>. Major fish-ins were the first real form of protest in activism amongst many Native Americans. Along with fish-ins, another early stage of native American activism was the initial occupation of Alcatraz. A group of five Sioux Indians traveled to the island and claimed it as Indian land. Russell Means, one of the Indians on the 1964 occupation, stated “I felt a freedom that I had never felt experienced, as though Alcatraz were mine.”<sup>31</sup> They were on the island for a mere 4 hours before they were told to leave the island. The treaty of 1868, also known as the Fort Laramie Treaty,

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, “Roots,” 131.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Fixico, *The Urban*, 15, 22, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson “Roots.” 132.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson “Roots,” 133.

<sup>31</sup> Russell Means, Marvin J, Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means*. (New



said that any surplus land could be reclaimed by the Sioux people, and that is how the occupiers justified their claim. Though the first occupation was brief, it sparked the interest of other Indian activist who planned a more efficient takeover which would turn out to be the longest occupation of any federal land.<sup>32</sup> These early Indian protests were not tolerated and many arrests were made to control and deplete tensions that arose. Unfortunately for natives, many other protests by the civil rights movement, the anti war movement, and student activists were common at this time. Those protests/demonstrations cast a shadow over the Indians and their demonstrations that prevented them from receiving the acknowledgement they so desperately strived for.

The 1960's was a time of reform and rebellion. The social movements had become front page news all over the nation. One of the most popular movements of the time was the civil rights movement, but there were many more movements such as: La Raza Movement, the Black Panther party, Anti-War protest, a wave of feminist movements, and a series of student activist movements that would eventually be named the "new left."<sup>33</sup> The sixties also birthed the rise of Native American activism. Newspapers, radio stations, and television networks elaborately expressed the demands of each movement, some more than others. Native American activism witnessed the power of public displays, demonstrations, and protests and used them when developing their own identity amongst the social movements of the era. An idea and policy that Natives used on Alcatraz was from the civil rights, and that idea was "Civil Disobedience." The power of public displays impacted the Native American activists, giving the Indians the urge to unite and finally receive the recognition they deserved from the President and his cabinet.

As the Indians reached out for the President's attention, his eyes and ears were already

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York: St. Martin's Press 1991) 106.

<sup>32</sup> Eagle Adam Fortunate, *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz*. (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 2002) 38.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, "Roots." 132.

consumed with issues deemed more important than Indian wants and needs. President Richard Nixon came into office in arguably one of the worst times. There were enormous amounts of issues that needed to be addressed as Nixon entered the White House. Not only were social movements causing a lot of noise; Nixon also, was confronted with the issues of education, the war on cancer, and the repercussions from the Vietnam War that required his full attention. Nixon, however, was one of the most progressive presidents when it came to Indian policies. Although three major Indian occupations happened during his presidency, they were not in direct relations to his policies. Many historians suggest that his tolerance and respect for Native Americans came from his days at Whittier College because his head football coach, Chief Wallace Newman, was a Cherokee Indian.<sup>34</sup> Even though the idea of self-determination without termination was briefly mentioned by Johnson in 1968, Nixon actually backed the idea and pushed for changes to be made to allow Indians to self-govern themselves. Unfortunately, his words and support were not enough at first to change the minds of the members of Congress because Self-determination was not accepted until the after the Alcatraz occupation of 1969. Nixon and his staff were extremely active in reforming Native American rights. In the span of the three major occupations (Alcatraz, B.I.A takeover, and Wounded Knee II) Nixon and his accomplices were able to settle land disputes with the Alaskan Natives, Taos Pueblo, and the Yakima.<sup>35</sup> Although Nixon was an improvement from the previous presidents, the Native American perspective of him varied, and many of them did not agree with him becoming president. Faced with let down after let down, most Indians did not believe their president would support them in their search for justice. LaNada Boyer, one of the leaders of the Occupation of

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<sup>34</sup> Dean J. Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest" *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 72 No.2, 206.

<sup>35</sup> Kotlowski, "Alcatraz," 202.

Alcatraz, clearly stated “anything Nixon says is shit.”<sup>36</sup> With or without Nixon’s support the Native Americans were not going to wait any longer. Native Americans took matters into their own hands and demanding National attention with the Occupation of Alcatraz.

### **“Keep off Indian Property”**

On the morning of November 20<sup>th</sup> 1969 when many people were barely waking up to start a seemingly normal day, a vast group of Native Americans had already gathered and claimed the Island of Alcatraz as Native land. Before daybreak, over seventy natives made their way to the docks, boarded boats, and were on their way to the island. Though they did not know how long they would remain on the island or how many they would consist of, the natives did know that they would not be moved easily and now more than ever they needed come together to fight for their native sovereign rights. Alcatraz had been occupied by Native Americans twice prior to the November 20 take over. Both of the previous seizures of the island had only lasted a couple of hours before being forcefully removed. Part of the reason why they were not successful like the final occupation of Alcatraz was because they did not have enough people with them which made them easy to kick out. However, each occupation grew in numbers; from the first one in 1964 that started with a small group of five Sioux, then to the occupation on November 9<sup>th</sup> that had forty participants, finally to the third occupation that began with seventy-eight participants and grew to over two hundred demonstrators at its peak. The question of why Alcatraz is seemingly obvious, but the real question remained why November? What sparked the fuse that led to the longest occupation of Alcatraz?

When the Indian Center in San Francisco caught fire and was destroyed in the last days of October in 1969 Native American student activist and Red Power organizations were already in the midst of planning a demonstration to get Indian issues heard on a national scale. The Indian

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 203.

Center was a common meeting place for bay area natives who were trying to cope with the relocation process, as well as hold on to as much of their culture and traditions as possible. The center also was a place where Red Power organizations met to discuss the future of Indian activism. The future leaders of Alcatraz, Richard Oakes, LaNada Boyer, John Trudell, Eagle Adam Fortunate, Grace Thrope, and Stella Leach, met at the Indian Center and created the radical Indian right.<sup>37</sup> After the center was burnt down, Native Americans in the bay area needed a new place where they could meet. When deciding where this location would be, the natives wanted and felt the need to make a statement to the public that they were no longer going to be passive. They also remembered their brothers who had occupied the island five years earlier. The relentless students had made the decision, and off to Alcatraz they went. To make a nineteenth month takeover successful it would need great organization and leaders who could take control and guide the direction of the movement in order to reach the goals they set from the start. The seventy-eight original occupants of Alcatraz knew this and picked their leader almost immediately.

Once on the island, Richard Oakes, a Mohawk, was unanimously chosen to be the official voice of the members of the Alcatraz occupation.<sup>38</sup> Oakes was faced with the difficult objective to speak on behalf of all the participants on and off the island who wanted to portray a single unified pan-Indian or intertribal, as natives prefer, movement. The occupants decided they needed to get a detailed understanding of the layout of the island in order to figure out where they could sleep, host their meetings, and just in general to get to know their new home.<sup>39</sup> Many of the occupants were young college students who came together from UC Santa Cruz, UCLA, San Francisco State, and UC Berkley to form the Indians of All Tribes. The Indians of All Tribes

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 45-46.

<sup>38</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 5.

wasted little time on Alcatraz to set forth a proclamation offering the government about \$1.24 an acre, which was almost triple of what the government was offering Natives for their land at the time.<sup>40</sup> The Indians wrote in a rather sarcastic tone in order to reveal to the government that their demeaning approach to securing native land would no longer be accepted. The leaders of the Indians of All Tribes listed a number of reasons why Alcatraz is similar to a reservation:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh water.
3. The sanitation facilities are inadequate.
4. There are no oil and or mineral rights.
5. There is no Industry and so unemployment is very great....<sup>41</sup>

Now that Native Americans were occupying the island and had no intentions of leaving soon, the occupants wanted Alcatraz to be more than just a demonstration, they saw Alcatraz as a symbol, a symbol that would be seen by anyone entering the bay because the first thing they would witness is “Indian Land.”<sup>42</sup> Adam Nordwall, later known as Eagle Adam Fortunate, was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle under a political cartoon of the occupation; he said “When you see most of the reservations in this country, Alcatraz looks pretty good.”<sup>43</sup> Just as soon as the excitement of the occupation was taking over the occupants, problems surfaced almost simultaneously.

Food and water were of the two most important items that were scarce from the get go. What made things worse is that soon as the realization of the seizure of the island set in amongst officials the coast guard set up a blockade preventing any assistance reaching those on the

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<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 53-55 and also Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 28-29.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *The American*, Chapter 4.

<sup>43</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

island.<sup>44</sup> On the island there were only three working toilets and the electricity on the island had been cut off. The occupants did not worry though, they understood the challenge that faced them and did not back down. Electricity was another important thing that the occupants did not have on the island. One thing the occupants were not short of was support and media coverage.

Reporters and supporters flocked in great numbers to the island causing mixed feelings of how outsiders would be viewed, welcomed and or not welcomed to the island. Initially on the island the Indians welcomed supporters to visit the island because they were encouraged by them. A few months into the occupation after some trouble had occurred some of the leaders became hesitant and not sure of how they felt about supporters coming to visit because of the mess they left behind.<sup>45</sup> Also, the leaders of the occupation eventually passed a rule that you had to be an Indian person to stay on the island.<sup>46</sup> New coming Indians were never turned away, for they not only brought support but they brought assistance in other departments. New members to the island brought a generator, since the power to the island was shut off; they also fixed a reported thirty five toilets, and brought more tepees for those living on the island.<sup>47</sup> More support did not influence the minds of the federal government and this was clear with the immediate denial of the Native American proclamation for the island.

Many governmental officials were torn on the issue of what to do with the Native Americans on Alcatraz. Some felt that granting the island to the Indians would be beneficial on their part, while others wondered why they were allowed to stay and pushed for a removal strategy to gain the upper hand in the situation.<sup>48</sup> Robert Robertson, director of the NCIO,

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<sup>44</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Indian Joe Morris, *Alcatraz Indian Occupation Diary*, (1998)109.

<sup>47</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> [Alcatraz, Box9,] WHCF: SMOF: [Bradley Patterson Jr.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

suggested that they leave the Indians alone on the island because the public was already losing interest and the hype would eventually die down.<sup>49</sup> What Robert Robertson and many other officials did not realize is that the Native Americans present on the island wanted to be left alone. The goal of Alcatraz was to make it their new home, while gaining public attention on a national scale which had never been conceivable prior to the takeover of the island.

Besides the fact that the Natives wanted their own land, the occupiers of Alcatraz wanted to educate America of the struggles and injustice that the American Indians face day to day, and the obstacles they had to overcome throughout history. How the natives would educate their future children and Americans was through a list of plans presented in the original proclamation. The list consist of: a Center for Native American Studies, an American Indian Spiritual Center, an Indian Center of Ecology, Indian training schools, American Indian Museum, and keeping the dungeon to represent the incarcerated natives.<sup>50</sup> While on the island they reverted to traditional customs that were basically lost during the time of relocation. The Idea of Self-Determination and Red Power were heavily focused on by the occupants who were no loner quiet by standers, but now vocal demonstrators fighting for what had been promised to them. Surrounded by social movements, as discussed earlier, the natives used the words and ideas from the civil rights movement in order to gain public backing.<sup>51</sup> However, the Natives did not want integration like the members of the civil rights strived for. The Indians wanted to be separated from the white public. They wanted their own land, own teachers, own doctors, and their own government. The native activist understood that they needed to be diligent in their pursuit, but not in a violent manner.

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<sup>49</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *The American*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson "Roots," 132.

The takeover of the Island was a rather peaceful time, initially. The Native Americans did not present arms and did not encourage violence, rather they encouraged civil disobedience. The government informed the occupiers that they were trespassing but they also recognized the fact that the demonstration was peaceful so they would not use force to remove them from the island. Scott Davis, an itinerant laborer, said “It is clear to me that the Administration should not attempt to remove the Indians from Alcatraz either through force or through a subtler means of persuasion or harassment.”<sup>52</sup> Throughout the nineteen month occupation there was countless meetings between governmental officials and the leaders of the Indians of All Tribes. During those meetings, the two parties discussed and proposed options for what was to become of the island. Some meetings went well and some meetings drew them further apart from a tentative agreement.<sup>53</sup> As long as the Native Americans remained on the island, they were going to continue on and proceed with everyday duties. Whether or not a deal was made, the Indians had work to do and did not wait for an answer from the government.

On the island there was many things that needed to be done and everyone played a indispensable role in keeping the occupation alive. Women played a much larger role than they are credited for. Some of the main female figures on the island were LaNada Boyer, Wilma Mankiller, Millie Ketcheshawno, and Denise Quitquit. Denise Quitquit joined the movement fairly early and describes the women’s roles on island as, “The women are the backbone. They continue the life of the people. They’re the teachers. They are the cultural protectors, and so they were there; and they did what needed to be done.”<sup>54</sup> Indian Joe Morris wrote in his diary wrote about women. He said,

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<sup>52</sup> [Public Views, Box 34] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>53</sup> [Political Leaders Plans, Box 34,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.



“The women were very active... The women did the cooking and the kitchen work, and worked in the offices at 4339 California Street and at Pier 40, Alcatraz Depot. Indian women also worked for the Alcatraz newsletter and took care of the kids on the island. If it wasn't for our Indian women doing all the work they did, keeping the Alcatraz movement alive, we might have fallen apart. Thanks to the women.”<sup>55</sup>

Quitiquit also said, on behalf of the women, “We set up an office in San Francisco to bring donations.”<sup>56</sup> This shows that in order for the seizure to last and be as successful as it was, the help and support of those natives and non-natives on the mainland were essential. Children too contributed on the island in a way that seems almost unprecedented. LaNada Boyer describes the children as “the wrecking crew,” she said “If the Coast Guard ever tries to land, we'll put the kids out front- they'd scare the hell out of anybody.”<sup>57</sup> Though it seemed many natives agreed with the Indians on Alcatraz the public support and view varied.

Federal officials were not the only ones who had differing views of the occupation. The public view of the occupation not only differed from person to person, it also changed depending on what was going on at the time. The occupation even was supported by celebrities and people of higher social status. A band by the name of Credence Clearwater Revival donated a boat named *Clearwater* for those who needed to go back and forth from the island and to the mainland.<sup>58</sup> Anthony Quinn, actor, paid a surprise visit to Alcatraz and he was very clear about how he felt about the occupation, “If they can make this dream of theirs come true it will be a

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<sup>54</sup> PBS, “Alcatraz is Not an Island” PBS Video and Text, <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/alcatrazisnotaniland/people.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Indian Joe Morris, 109.

<sup>56</sup> PBS “Alcatraz is Not an Island.”

<sup>57</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>58</sup> Kotlowski, “Alcatraz,” 207.

wonderful thing...I'll stand behind them 100 percent.”<sup>59</sup> Many people questioned the validity of the occupation. A.R. Crawford wrote to the editor of the *San Francisco Examiner* and said “I am weary of minority groups ‘preserving’ something from the dim past atrociously. This is not really the American Way.”<sup>60</sup> The occupants of the island and their supporters obviously kept the movement alive, but media coverage gave the Indians the edge they needed.

Alcatraz sent a powerful message to all who witnessed it, but you did not need to be in San Francisco to see it. Newspapers, television news channels, and radio stations flooded the United States with breaking news of the occupation. This was indeed a new phenomenon because prior to the occupation Indians were not a hot topic for the media. The media played two main roles for the Indian activist on Alcatraz; one of the main roles was show the rest of the nation that the Native Americans were suffering and they are not going to tolerate the injustice they have faced any more. The second role of the media was to bring support from other Native Americans and non-Native peoples.

The initial shock of the occupation was nation wide and it landed Native Americans on the front pages of newspapers all over the country. Notable national newspapers covering the occupation included : *The Washington Post, the New York Times, Rocky Mountain News, Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Atlanta Constitution, and the Philadelphia Inquirer*.<sup>61</sup> The occupants were receiving attention that no other Indian movement or Indian demonstration received on such a large scale. In numerous newspapers they had letters to the editor referring to the occupation of Alcatraz and their feelings towards it. A man by the name

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<sup>59</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>60</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>61</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

Tom Whitecloud wrote to the editor and said “The men at Alcatraz are simply trying to play the game you brought over. If it is not being used, stick a flag in and claim it. Move in and stay. This is, after all the American Way.”<sup>62</sup> Newspapers were essential in providing the common everyday folks with news, updates of the events happening, and what both sides are proposing to do with the island. As much as newspapers helped gain support for the demonstrators on Alcatraz, they also served as a tool of destruction.

As the movement progressed and conflict amongst those on the island increased, the non-violent personality of the movement changed and the media was there to show how. Reports of Indians threatening and refusing to allow coast guard members to set on the island to repair the lighthouse became a concern for political officials.<sup>63</sup> Numerous accounts of shootings of guns and bows and arrows towards boats in close range were reported in newspapers and heightened tensions as well.<sup>64</sup> “Indians display Alcatraz ‘Arms’,” was a newspaper heading after a number the shootings occurred.<sup>65</sup> In a report sent to Ronald Reagan, Governor of California at the time, it was stated that “There has been and continues to be widespread use of narcotics. There are approximately 50 weapons on the island, including rifles, pistols, and shotguns.”<sup>66</sup> More shocking than the display of arms, death on the island created a much larger media frenzy that affected views of occupants on Alcatraz.

The death of Richard Oakes daughter, Yvonne, stunned the public and was crucial

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<sup>62</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>63</sup> [Aids to Navigation, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>64</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>65</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>66</sup> [Political Leaders Plans, Box 34,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

turning point of the occupation. Yvonne Oakes fell down a stairwell landing directly on her head. She lived a couple hours before passing away in Marine hospital in San Francisco.<sup>67</sup> After Yvonne's death public support diminished because Richard Oakes would not allow FBI agents on the island to investigate.<sup>68</sup> Newspapers were quick to write "Girl dies After fall on Alcatraz."<sup>69</sup> Following the death of his daughter, Oakes was nearly beaten to death in San Francisco. In the next few months the government planned ways to remove the Indians. Fortunately for them, the native population began to deplete dramatically in the few remaining months of the occupation. On June 11<sup>th</sup> 1971 six men, four women, and five children were forcibly removed FBI agents and U.S. Marshalls and ended the Occupation of Alcatraz.<sup>70</sup>

### **Can you hear me NOW?!**

The ending of the Occupation of Alcatraz and the failure to maintain public support did not slow the American Indians. Following Alcatraz, new native activist groups began pushing harder, louder, and angrier to in order to gain the rights that their brothers and sisters on Alcatraz fought fiercely for. The American Indian Movement (AIM) wasted no time in implementing their demands in many takeovers including the one in South Dakota at Wounded Knee. "Less of a political movement than a force of nature,"<sup>71</sup> AIM was still forming as the Occupation of Alcatraz was going on. AIM leaders visited Alcatraz not only to show support to their brothers, but also to gain knowledge of how to execute a successful takeover.<sup>72</sup> Russell Means, present on the 1964 occupation of Alcatraz, and other AIM leaders rallied together thousands of Natives who were fed up with the federal Indian policy and began the march to Washington called the

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<sup>67</sup> Indian Joe Morris, 107.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> [General News Clippings, Box 33,] WHCF: SMOF: [Leonard Garment.] Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA. National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson "Roots," 127.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 128.

Trail of Broken Treaties.<sup>73</sup> Why the B.I.A. building? Sid Mills, one of the leaders alongside Means, said “Were going to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We own that son of a bitch,”<sup>74</sup> After hundreds of Indians poured into the federal building to discuss Indian housing and other issues. A representative Harrison Loesch said that federal money would not support them and their movement.<sup>75</sup> Enraged from the disappointing news, the Indians took over the B.I.A. headquarters.

The goal behind the Trail of Broken treaties was never to take over a federal building. The goal was to propose a twenty point document explaining Indian needs, while hosting a non-violent protest.<sup>76</sup> After police force was shown at the B.I.A. building, the Indians had enough and barricaded the doors.<sup>77</sup> After holding the federal building for seven days the government negotiators Brad Patterson and Leonard Garment, both involved with Alcatraz, expressed that they would not make arrest, pay housing expenses, and look over Indian requests if they gave up the building. The natives left the building with their heads held high for this was a huge success as a pan-Indian movement.<sup>78</sup>

With a victory under their belt, the American Indian Movement would not slow down. When they left the B.I.A. headquarters in 1972, they already had in mind where their next demonstration would be held. While on the Trail the of Broken treaties they passed Wounded Knee in South Dakota and they remembered the massacre that took place there in 1890 That would be the location of the a different type of takeover. This takeover was very intense and ended with two Native Americans shot and killed, and two hundred and thirty seven arrests were

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>74</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 153.# Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 153-54.

<sup>76</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 155.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson “Roots,” 148.

made during the occupation that lasted seventy one days.<sup>79</sup> The Wounded Knee seizure reverted away from the tactics and ideas that the leaders of Alcatraz used which caused the movement to lose momentum.

In Retrospect, we are able to see that the personality of Indian activists changed. It is clear that when Indian activist are no longer acting along the lines of civil disobedience, the government and the public lose patience and tolerance causing the activist to be unsuccessful. Using examples such as Alcatraz, the takeover at the B.I.A. headquarters, and the seizure of Wounded Knee Two we will be able to see how the tone of the participants, ultimately decide whether or not the natives demands and goals will be met. Starting with Alcatraz, since it gave the Natives a jumpstart in their activism, when it was peaceful the government did not show force. As the movement began to become more hostile to outsiders the government stepped in and forcibly removed them. At the B.I.A. headquarters it was peaceful on the Indians side, but not peaceful on the other side of the conflict because of the extreme police force. Once the building of the natives there were not reported gun shots or any acts of violent upon either side. The takeover of that federal building was a success, they went in with a goal and the negotiations went as they wanted them too. As for Wounded Knee 2, violence was a main factor throughout the entire seventy one days it was under Indian control. Death and arrest were the outcome and it was not a success for either side. Nixon felt that his administrators handled the situation well, "It was important to do right... we didn't get much credit... because other things were happening that [were] bigger news."<sup>80</sup> So in essence when the movements remained non-violent and conducted it self in a more appropriate manner, they were able to achieve much greater success with a more fitting outcome to their liking. This is why the B.I.A. takeover is the greatest success

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 150.

of the three.

### **We decide our own Success**

So if the occupation of Alcatraz was not a complete success, what makes it such an influential event for Native American activist and their movement? Before answering that question, it is necessary that we evaluate what success means. If we base success on solely reaching the goals originally laid out, then Alcatraz may not have been successful because as we know they were never granted control of the Island. If we, however, base success on the impact of the movement on the Indians on the Island and for those Indian activist who followed it was an enormous success. Alcatraz showed many natives that they could stand up for what they believed in, that natives were no longer going to be ignored, and most importantly they had the power to change their future. Hank Adams, Sioux Indian involved in fish-in, said “Let the public remember that Alcatraz was instrumental in placing the needs and concerns of Indian people upon the national agenda.”<sup>81</sup> Of course, there was strict guidelines in which needed to be followed if they wanted to be successful. The reason I briefly included both the BIA takeover and the Wounded Knee episode was to show the difference in success amongst native peoples. Compared to one another, the Wounded Knee takeover was the less successful even though that occupation lasted sixty-four days longer. So if it is clear that Alcatraz created and set the stage for Native American protests/demonstrations, why is it rarely talked about?

There is no one definite answer to why Alcatraz is rarely discussed. It is possible to infer, a reason that Alcatraz does not get much attention may be because some do not consider the movement a success due to the fact that the occupants did not reach their initial goals, which

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<sup>80</sup> Kotlowski, “Alcatraz,” 215.

<sup>81</sup> Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 141.

were stated above. With the evidence provided, we are able to see that Alcatraz was as success in the eyes of natives. Another probable inference is that, with such a long occupation people do not get excited about the topic, since the latter occupations were much briefer and a lot more action was involved. Violence and negative seem to enhance to importance of social movements, whether good or bad. This is clear with the constant reminder and scholarly work on the Wounded Knee two occupation. These are possible ideas that can be inferred just by looking at the comparable amounts of written text written on the specific events.

In order to understand how far a social movement has come, it is essential to take a look at the past and grasp a detailed comprehension of the roots of the movement. Self-determination, a term that meant many things to the Native American activist of the 1960's and 70's, still remains a common phrase amongst the American Indian policy today. The most powerful phrase in the Indian activist movement had its defining moment during the American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969. Since Alcatraz, Native Americans no longer live in the shadows of society. The occupation brought the Native American into the public eye where they would remain. Though at times the movement may have lost its footing, as all social movements do, the goals were clear and without the events at Alcatraz those goals would never have been reached nor would they have even been heard. Because of the Native Americans on Alcatraz, people were no longer ashamed of being an Indian. Unity amongst the countless native groups was something that had been lost for decades. After Alcatraz, the importance of what tribe you were from seemed to be less important, and the idea of being Indian was accepted as a true identity. Although, so many urban problems remain governmental policies have changed dramatically over the years regarding Native Americans and their land claims. The Indians have, for the most part, gained their sovereign rights. A nation within a nation, the Native Americans now have



even resembled the U.S. in the fact that they give their own version of the state of the American Indian Union every year. When people talk about social movements of the sixties, there is no doubt one of the most enduring movements that survived was the Red Power movement, which all started with the Occupation of Alcatraz.

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