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Prevailing Winds: Radical Activism and the American Indian
Movement

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Rev. David K. Calfee
August 2002

Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair
Dr. Stephen Fritz
Dr. Henry Antkiewicz

Keywords: American Indian Movement, Wounded Knee 1973,
Activism, Native Americans

ABSTRACT

Radical Activism and the American Indian Movement

by

Rev. David K. Calfee

In 1968 a number of Chippewa Indians met in Minneapolis, Minnesota to discuss some of the problems they faced in their communities. This meeting gave birth to the American Indian Movement. From 1968 to 1974, the American Indian Movement embarked on a series of radical protests designed to draw attention to the concerns of American Indians and force the Federal government into acting on their behalf. Unfortunately, these protests brought about a backlash from Federal law enforcement agencies that destroyed the American Indian Movement's national power structure.

DEDICATION

To Beryl Calfee, my paternal grandfather,
for the encouragement he gave and the lessons
that he taught me over the years.
And to the rest of my family and friends for always being
there for me throughout my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Elwood Watson for the persistence he showed in making sure that I stayed on track and completed this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Fritz and Dr. Henry Antkiewicz for the comments and questions that strengthened my work and sparked my curiosity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The streets of Washington DC were alive with activity in the days leading up to the November election of 1972. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building was decorated with American flags and a teepee that had been erected on the front lawn. Hundreds of American Indians lined the building's halls and offices. The air was filled with singing and chanting as government officials and American Indian leaders met in the heart of the nation's capital city.

The scene at the BIA building was far from ordinary. The American flags on display around the building were hanging upside down. The American Indians inside were sleeping in offices, scrawling graffiti on walls, and rummaging through cabinets filled with government files. Outside the building, law enforcement officers had erected barricades and were involved in numerous skirmishes with the building's occupants. The meetings taking place between federal officials and American Indian leaders were not part of policy planning sessions, rather they were negotiations between an occupying force and those seeking its removal.

Ten years earlier, the occupation of the BIA building would have been an unthinkable action. Ten years earlier, American Indian activism was still in its embryonic stages. In 1969, that changed as Indian activists landed on, occupied, and claimed for their own Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. This group, under the name Tribes of All Nations, attempted to focus national attention on the problems American Indians faced in their communities as well as seeking to shed light on the less than honorable dealings between American Indians and the United States government.

The Tribes of All Nations garnered attention from national as well as world media. Shortly after the island was occupied, those involved issued a proclamation that formally laid claim to Alcatraz and lampooned the treaties previously signed between the United States government and the American Indian tribes of old. In the proclamation, the occupiers offered to buy Alcatraz from the United States with glass beads and red cloth, the same price paid to Indian tribes for Manhattan. They went on to compare Alcatraz to an Indian reservation due to its completely inadequate facilities and lack of productive soil.¹

¹Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), p. 518.

The occupation of Alcatraz lasted for nineteen months. The few remaining occupants were expelled from the island on June 11, 1971. Though they were ultimately removed from the island, the Tribes of All Nations made a lasting impression on the American public as well as the minds of American Indians around the country.

In 1970 and 1971, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) followed up on this radical activist precedent by occupying Mt. Rushmore to hold prayer meetings and protest the seizure of that land by the United States government. In 1971, AIM members disrupted the Thanksgiving celebration at Plymouth, Massachusetts as they took over the *Mayflower II* and symbolically painted Plymouth Rock with red paint. These early actions were only the beginning of an activism campaign that was startling in its scope and its methods.

The occupation of the BIA building in Washington DC was the first step in taking activism to a more visible level. It was the result of a 1972 protest caravan known as the Trail of Broken Treaties. This caravan had been intended to be an American Indian version of the African-

American Civil Rights Movement's 1963 march on Washington.² This was to be the first great protest with members of the American Indian Movement working in concert with other Indian Rights organizations.

As with nearly all of AIM's actions, the Trail of Broken Treaties degenerated into a standoff with law enforcement officials. This confrontational style of protest soon became synonymous with AIM. From its earliest actions to the fateful standoff with federal agents at the Wounded Knee massacre site in 1973, it was apparent that AIM was different from its predecessors.

The American Indian Movement was founded during the summer of 1968 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the years that followed, AIM embarked on a campaign of national activism that was designed to draw attention to the concerns of American Indians and force the Federal government to act in response to those concerns. However, this campaign had unforeseen consequences. Following the occupation of the BIA building, the increasingly radical nature of AIM's actions created a backlash from federal law enforcement agencies. In the turmoil that followed, many of AIM's leaders became fugitives, fleeing from waves of

²Vine Deloria Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 46-47.

litigation. Many of those who stood trial, whether by choice or force, found themselves serving prison sentences due to sometimes-questionable convictions.

By the late 1970s, the American Indian Movement's national organization had been shattered by litigation, the fugitive status of leaders, and an air of paranoia that followed the revelation of FBI informants within AIM. All these factors combined to topple the organization's national power structure and sent it reeling into obscurity.

The forces that shaped the American Indian Movement began with the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Upon arriving in the New World, Europeans often found themselves involved in all out war with the native populations (as the Spanish did in Central and South America) or involved in numerous skirmishes (as did settlers in North America).

During the North American wars that preceded the American Revolution, Indian tribes allied with opposing European armies, seeking to defeat enemy tribes. During the Revolution itself, some tribes found themselves allied with the British, while others sided with the Continental Army.

Following the Revolutionary War, hostility between the fledgling United States and certain segments of the Indian

population did not abate. Though George Washington, with a weak military force at his disposal, favored a peaceful coexistence with the native population, many of his successors found new pressures guiding their Indian policies.

By the time Thomas Jefferson became president, Americans were pushing farther west in search of new lands and new opportunities. As this expansion continued, conflict with resident tribes began to increase. With the addition in 1803 of the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson envisioned a relocation of Indian tribes to the trans-Mississippi West. In this new region, Jefferson felt that Indian tribes should be encouraged to give up hunting and communal living in favor of farming and individual land ownership.³

During the Jeffersonian era, seizure and sale of Indian lands was already beginning in North Carolina and Tennessee. After the War of 1812, the federal government began pursuing more aggressive Indian policies aimed at clearing the land east of the Mississippi for settlement by whites. It was during this time that Andrew Jackson rose to prominence as a war hero at the Battle of New Orleans

³Zinn, *A People's History*. pp. 124-125.

and later as an Indian fighter, though he also served to further his fortunes as a land speculator.⁴

Beginning in 1813, Jackson led a series of campaigns against the Creek and their allies. Jackson was once again heralded as a hero after he defeated the Creeks at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, effectively ending Creek resistance in the lower south. In the treaty that followed the battle, a new facet was introduced into the post-conflict agreements with Indian tribes. The Jeffersonian idea of private ownership of land was introduced, thus not only were the tribes defeated, they were coerced into giving up their traditional ways of life.⁵ The treaty making did not end in 1814. By the mid-1820s, the Creek Indians had been forced to relocate several times as new treaties were forced upon them.

In 1818, Jackson began a series of excursions against the Seminole Indians in Florida that pushed them into the southern swamps. This led to the purchase of Florida from Spain in 1819.

In 1828, Jackson was elected president of the United States and introduced a policy of Indian Removal that eventually opened all land east of the Mississippi River to

⁴Ibid., p. 129.

⁵Ibid., pp. 126-127.

settlement. Though the Iroquois Confederation was allowed to remain in New York and remnants of the Cherokee and Seminole evaded removal in the south, Indian resistance to expansion in the east was ended.

Forcing the Indians into the trans-Mississippi west did not solve the Indian question for all times. By the mid-1800s, the richness of that region was discovered and white settlers began to head west once again towards new horizons and new lands.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the United States Army was called upon to protect the increasing numbers of people moving westward towards California and the Pacific Northwest. With the lessons of early Indian Wars behind them, the United States government sought to maintain a friendly relationship with the tribes of the west.⁶

These relations were almost immediately put to the test as trading posts and forts began to spring up along the heavily used routes. A brief period of conflict began just before the Civil War but was cut short as military units were recalled for service in the east or left to join the southern cause.

⁶Peter Matthiessen, *In The Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 5.

Following the Civil War, white Americans hungry for new life and new opportunity began heading westward into the open expanses. As settlers began to enter the Great Plains in much larger numbers, the federal government once again began to focus its attention on relations with the Plains Indians.

In 1866, a group of soldiers and scouts were sent to open up the Bozeman Trail into Montana. The Oglala Sioux under Red Cloud saw this group as an advance into Indian territory and began harassing the workers, hoping to keep the trail unused.⁷

In December of 1866, the Plains Indians made the first major strike in what would become known as Red Cloud's War. Nearly two thousands warriors under the direction of High Back Bone gathered near Fort Phil Kearny in modern day Wyoming.⁸ After drawing a detachment of soldiers out of the fort, the gathered warriors rode down upon them, killing the entire unit. This incident, known as the Fetterman Massacre, stunned the army and the nation.

Though the army wanted to embark on a large offensive to crush those responsible for the Fetterman Massacre, it

⁷Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁸Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), pp. 104-105.

was derailed by the release of a report by Senator James Doolittle on the status of Indians in the United States. This report showed that Indian tribes were greatly suffering due to the lack of land and white encroachment.⁹ With the revelations of the Doolittle report, the prevailing sentiment in Washington was to end the affair and resume friendly relations with the Sioux.

Red Cloud would not cease hostilities until the encroachments along the Bozeman Trail were ended. Small skirmishes took place after the Fetterman Massacre, but all out war was avoided. The war officially lasted until November 6, 1868, when the Fort Laramie Treaty was signed and the Bozeman Trail was abandoned.

According to the treaty, the Sioux were guaranteed huge stretches of land in the Dakotas. This land was set aside exclusively for the use of the tribe. The treaty claimed that no one outside the tribes named would be able to "pass over, settle upon, or reside in the territory described in this article, or in such territory as may be added to this reservation for the use of said Indians."¹⁰ In return for the lands granted by the treaty, the Sioux gave up any claim of territory outside the reservation.

⁹Ibid., pp. 106-107.

¹⁰Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, Article 2, www.aics.org/WK/treaty1868.html.

Though the treaty with the Sioux was honored for some time, many in Washington began to rethink the strategies that had led to the treaty. In 1871, the decision was made to no longer consider Indian tribes as independent nations with which treaties could be made.¹¹

The 1868 treaty remained intact after the 1871 decision, but the conditions upon which it was based were ultimately violated as the mineral wealth of the reservation lands became apparent. Whites searching for gold on Sioux lands violated the Fort Laramie Treaty on numerous occasions, but without solid evidence of ore deposits large numbers of miners had not yet risked the dangerous trip.

In 1874, a party under George Armstrong Custer advanced into the Dakotas on a reconnaissance mission. The troop consisted of nearly a thousand soldiers with a sizable wagon train in tow. During the expedition, Custer reported that the expedition had found gold in the Black Hills.¹² As the news of this discovery made its way east, parties of prospectors began to invade the Black Hills, hoping to strike it rich. These men were in clear violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty, but the absence of

¹¹Matthiessen, *Crazy Horse*, p. 8.

¹²Ibid., pp. 8-9.

any federal response indicated that the army was in no hurry to enforce the provisions against trespassing.

After an attempt to negotiate for the purchase of the Black Hills failed, the United States government sent troops onto the Great Sioux Reservation in order to find and detain those who would pose the biggest threat to acquiring the Black Hills.¹³ During this campaign, Custer and his detachment of the Seventh Cavalry met their fates on the banks of the Little Big Horn River. Though this victory gained a bit of breathing room for the Sioux, the consequences were harsh. The Fort Laramie Treaty was ultimately set aside due to the hostile behavior of the Sioux and the Black Hills were forcibly purchased.

As the years wore on, the remaining bands of "hostile" Sioux were rounded up and forced onto reservations a fraction of the size of the Great Sioux Reservation that had been set forth in the treaty. The final blow came in 1890 when members of Custer's old unit, the Seventh Cavalry, massacred a band of men and women at Wounded Knee.

The massacre at Wounded Knee has echoed throughout the years that followed as a symbol of the subjugation of the Plains Indians. The famed Sioux holy man Black Elk

¹³Ibid., pp. 10-11.

described the implications of the event with unmatched eloquence. He said,

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now...I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped...And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.¹⁴

Following Wounded Knee, the Indian Wars drew to a close and the days of "civilizing" the American Indians began. It was not enough that tribes throughout the country had been defeated on the battlefield. Now it was necessary to ensure the assimilation of the tribes into American culture.

The process of "civilizing the savages" began before the Indian Wars had ended, but with the complete subjugation of the tribes, the process became much more easily implemented. One of the first attempts to assimilate American Indians and break apart their traditional communities came with the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act.

Under the provisions of the Dawes Act, the collective ownership of American Indian tribal lands was to be replaced by private ownership of land. The Act stated that each head of an Indian family that resided on a reservation

¹⁴John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 270.

would receive an allotment of 160 acres. Unmarried Indians over 18 years of age and orphans were to receive 80 acres of land, while unmarried Indians under 18 would receive 40 acres.¹⁵

The land allotments were to be administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and any land that was not parceled out to Indians was then available for sale to whites. Due to the corruption that had long plagued the BIA, the best land available for allotment was often held back from the Indians involved in the program so that it could be sold to whites. The income from this action was often put in trust for the tribe and the interest used by the BIA.¹⁶

In terms of the land allotments, the Dawes Act was far from a success. Many Indians were unwilling to take the risks necessary for such a program to work. Others were incapable of working the land that they were allotted due to the simple lack of adequate agricultural skills. In the end, the Dawes Act did more to erode the economic viability of the reservations than it did to convert Indians into farmers.

However, the Dawes Act had another facet that proved to have much greater impact on the lives of American

¹⁵Klaus Frantz, *Indian Reservations in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 25.

¹⁶*Ibid*,. p. 26.

Indians. Under the Act, a system of boarding schools began that would take children off the reservation and put them in an environment that would encourage them to assimilate into white culture. It was under this system of schools that the famous slogan "Kill the Indian to Save the Man" developed. This meant that in order to produce a functioning member of American society the traditional values and practices of the Indian had to be exterminated.

In the BIA schools, Indian children found great hardship and little or no support. Children were sometimes taken hundreds of miles from their reservation homes and cast into schools with no preparation. Mary Crow Dog, wife of AIM spiritual leader Leonard Crow Dog, remembered being "dumped into [the boarding school] like a small creature from another world, helpless, defenseless, bewildered, trying instinctively to survive and sometimes not surviving at all."¹⁷

The schools also stripped the young Indians of their traditional style of dress. All children were given uniform clothes to wear, rather than their traditional clothing. Boys were forced to cut their hair. They were also told to refrain from using their native tongues,

¹⁷Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 28.

instructed instead to speak English. Leonard Peltier, a security chief for AIM, referred to the years he spent in such a school as his "first imprisonment." He recalled slipping out behind the school building just to speak to his classmates in their native tongue and reveling in the rebelliousness of daring to be an Indian.¹⁸

In addition to being stripped of their cultural identity, many young Indians found themselves abused physically or sexually at the hands of their instructors. Violating the rules could bring about various forms of punishment from work details to beatings. Worse than punishment, however, were the sexual assaults that sometimes occurred as the schools attracted pedophiles.¹⁹

Those who attended public school rather than a BIA school often found their lot to be no better. Racism was rampant throughout the regions heavily populated by American Indians and this often showed in the performance of children in public schools. Many who had attained high marks in Indian schools often faltered and failed in public school.

For those who managed to complete the cycle of education at the off reservation schools, life was often no

¹⁸Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 78.

¹⁹Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, pp. 39-40.

better than if they had never left the reservation at all. With a white man's education, many found that they were no longer accepted on the reservation. Others tried to find work off the reservations, yet they were not accepted into white culture either. With nowhere else to turn, many looked to alcohol to free them from their problems.

The education system that developed to accommodate American Indian children was far from adequate. While some schools sought to rob children of their cultural identities, others failed to provide an environment in which the children could obtain a quality education.

Federal attempts to alter the position of American Indians did not stop with education and land allotment. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the introduction of the New Deal brought the potential for a new age in relations between the federal government and the scattered tribes. Yet, like so many of the idealistic programs proposed under the New Deal, the plans drafted to aid the American Indian communities failed to realize their full potentials.

One component of the New Deal was a piece of legislation that involved the reorganization of the tribal systems and the possibilities of new federal aid. John Collier, Roosevelt's Indian Commissioner, felt that the

federal government should assist American Indians in reviving their native cultures. However, Collier also proposed that the government provide the tribes with the monetary resources needed to enlarge their reservations through land purchases.²⁰

Congressional support of such reforms in the midst of the Great Depression was nearly nonexistent; thus the final version of once lofty goals left much to be desired. In 1934, Roosevelt signed into law the Indian Reorganization Act. This Act allowed for the conversion of tribal governments from a traditional style to a modified version of the U.S. government; however, the reorganization of the tribal government would be done only after the issue was put to a referendum.

The passage of this Act created a good deal of tension on reservations around the country. In some regions, such as the northeast, the tribes voted overwhelmingly against the reorganization.²¹ In other regions, however, the tribes were split. Many boycotted the vote to show their

²⁰Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.

²¹Peter Iverson, *"We Are Still Here": American Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1998), pp. 92-93.

opposition to the Act, but this simply allowed the referendum to pass.

The tribes that elected to reorganize their governments found it to be a mixed blessing. The new system of government relied on councilmen and women from the reservation and those most qualified often lacked the necessary transportation to participate. This new system of government also meant that the tribal councils would come more firmly under the control of the BIA.

The next phase of federal policy-making that greatly affected American Indians involved the Termination and Relocation policies passed in 1953 during the Eisenhower administration. These policies were first introduced while Harry S Truman served as president. Truman's Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Dillon S. Myer, had developed the ideas of termination and relocation. Myer had served as head of the War Relocation Authority during World War II and had proven himself to be extremely adept at relocating Japanese Americans from their own communities to the internment camps.²²

Under the policy of Termination, tribes that the federal government judged to be self-sufficient would be cut off from federal control, as well as federal funding.

²²Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 7.

In addition, the offices and facilities of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the targeted areas were to be abandoned. This policy was intended "to make the Indians within the territorial limits of the United States subject to the same laws...as are applicable to other citizens of the United States."²³ Eventually, the areas occupied by these reservations would come under the control of their respective state governments.²⁴

The tribes targeted included all tribes in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Also mentioned in the Termination Resolution were the Flathead, Klamath, Menominee, Potowatamie, and the Chippewa of Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota.²⁵

The policy of relocation worked hand in hand with termination. The goal of relocation programs was the transplanting of American Indians from the reservation lands to major cities around the country. In order to entice Indians to join the relocation drive, the federal government offered bus fare (one way), one year of free medical care, and aid in finding a job.²⁶

²³*Termination Resolution of 1953* reprinted in Robert Burnette and John Koster, *The Road to Wounded Knee* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), pp. 308-309.

²⁴Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 7.

²⁵*Termination Resolution of 1953*.

²⁶Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 7.

The relocation program was met with a variety of reactions. Many Indians supported the program and felt that the opportunity to leave the reservation and find work should be seized. However, others saw relocation as an attempt to depopulate and seize reservation lands.

Though approximately 35,000 men and women made the trip from the reservation to the city, many found that the successes they had been promised continued to elude them. Of the 35,000 that relocated, around 12,000 drifted back to the reservation.²⁷ Not all of the Indians participating in the relocation program found the situation so bleak. In areas like San Francisco, many found steady jobs and strong communities.

Despite some successes, the programs of Termination and Relocation were overall failures. Reservations that were terminated often fell into utter disarray and many of those who relocated often found themselves living in slums. It was thus that the "Red Ghettos" developed in cities such as San Francisco and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

In this urban scene, some American Indians fell prey to the seedier side of life off the reservation. Alcohol and drug abuse, while high on the reservation, seemed to be a larger problem in urban communities. Unemployment also

²⁷Ibid., p. 8.

began to affect many of the newly transplanted American Indians.

Though many American Indian men and women found themselves leaving the familiar surroundings of the reservations during the first half of the twentieth century, not all found the better life for which they had hoped. Some found themselves adrift in strange surroundings with little hope of support. Many, like future AIM member Anna Mae Aquash, found themselves bouncing back and forth between life in the city and life on the reservation discontent with the situations they faced in both places. Others, such as future AIM leaders Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and Russell Means, found themselves drifting in and out of trouble with the police.

The most lasting effect of the Termination and Relocation policies was to concentrate large numbers of discontent American Indians in urban centers. It was out of these urban centers that the core of the radical activists emerged. Men like Banks, Means, and Bellecourt somehow came together and offered hope to American Indians, first on a local level, and then nationally. The San Francisco community produced the Tribes of All Nations, but the Minneapolis-St. Paul community produced the American

Indian Movement. In a very short time, AIM rose from obscurity to the forefront in the Indian Rights struggle.

The American Indian Movement's rise to prominence was fueled by a series of protests designed to draw attention to the problems faced by American Indian communities. By focusing national attention on their communities, AIM leaders hoped to force the federal government into acting on their behalf.

The following chapters examine the most significant protests and the ultimately adverse affects that they would bring. The first chapter deals with the protests in 1970 and 1971 at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota and at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1970, as well as the 1972 protest at Gordon, Nebraska. The second chapter examines the two biggest protests. These are the 1972 takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building that is known as the Trail of Broken Treaties and the 1973 occupation of the Wounded Knee massacre site that resulted in a 71-day standoff with law enforcement agents. The third and final chapter examines the repercussions of these protests as federal law enforcement began a more active campaign against what they considered to be a group of radical militants.

CHAPTER 2

THE MOVEMENT BEGINS

In the summer of 1968, a group of nearly two hundred Chippewa from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area came together in order to discuss some of the problems they faced within their communities. According to Dennis Banks, these problems included "slum housing conditions; the highest unemployment rate in the whole of this country; [and] police brutality against our elders, women, and children."²⁸

This initial meeting was more than just a group of concerned residents. This meeting was the first planning session for an organization that would take active measures to combat the problems that were discussed. The organization that emerged from this and subsequent planning sessions was named the Concerned Indians of America. However, that name was scrapped after only a couple of weeks due to the unfavorable acronym. The new name that was adopted was the American Indian Movement.

The new name was to become as important as the actions that the group would later undertake. According to Paul

²⁸Dennis Banks as quoted in "Background of the American Indian Movement," *Dennis Banks Homepage*, members.aol.com/nowacumig/backgrnd.html. Accessed on 4/21/2001.

Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, "The name of this group...was perfection itself...it sounded authoritative and inclusive...it suggested action, purpose, and forward motion...it was big, transcending the lesser world of committees."²⁹

From its humble beginnings, AIM catapulted to the forefront of the Indian Movement. The men and women who met to take up the struggle of Indians in the Twin Cities area found themselves involved in a national organization that grabbed public attention with radical protests in cities and towns around the country.

In 1968, however, AIM was far removed from the organization that would one day draw the wrath of the federal government and find its leaders held as political prisoners or fleeing prosecution. In 1968, AIM was a local organization dealing with local problems; it was struggling to find an identity of its own. The tactics and plans being implemented at this stage were adopted from other organizations in other parts of the country.

In the Black Panther Party, AIM found the inspiration for an Indian Patrol that would help combat police misconduct in dealings with the Twin Cities' Indian population. Officers dispatched to Indian neighborhoods

²⁹Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 127.

often found themselves under the scrutiny of red-jacketed observers with cameras and tape recorders.

As AIM began to take shape and establish itself in the Twin Cities area, two men emerged as the leaders of the organization. Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt, though each had checkered pasts, took the reins of power and guided the fledgling group into a position of strength. These were men concerned with action more than words. In the fall of 1969, Banks was leading a meeting when it came to light that a local school was staging a Thanksgiving play that contained Indian characters that the group found to be derogatory.³⁰ Springing to action, Bellecourt set out to learn the date of the performance. He finally succeeded after posing as a drama teacher and then led the group to the school. In the end, AIM gained a small victory by convincing the school to cancel the play.³¹

AIM proceeded in this way for the remainder of 1968 and 1969. They identified local problems and addressed them in necessary ways. AIM tried to find work for the unemployed. They arranged legal representation for community members. They worked with local churches and other organizations to find funding and allies.

³⁰Ibid., p. 131.

³¹Ibid.

In 1969, AIM was still at the fringes of the Indian political world. Representatives attended national conferences of Indian leaders but only to pass out AIM literature not to sit as delegates. However, 1969 brought about two of the most significant events in the group's development. In 1969, the Tribes of All Nations occupied Alcatraz, thus introducing the idea of radical activism to the group, and AIM also met a man named Russell Means.

Perhaps no other figure in the American Indian Movement has drawn as much simultaneous praise and criticism as Russell Means. He has openly fought with other AIM leaders. He has resigned from the group over a dozen times. He has accused Vernon Bellecourt of ordering the death of AIM's highest-ranking female member. In these actions, Means has created a storm of controversy. However, Means provided the catalyst to move AIM from one chapter in the Twin Cities area to multiple chapters around the country. Means brought the historic importance of the Sioux into an organization made up almost completely of Chippewa.

Shortly after their initial meeting with Means, AIM leaders convinced him to join the organization. Means responded by returning to his home in Cleveland and

founding a new chapter of the organization. He also began to spearhead the drive towards national activism.

The American Indian Movement burst onto the national scene in 1970 first with a protest that led to the takeover of Mount Rushmore and then, a Thanksgiving Day protest in Plymouth, Massachusetts that led to the takeover of the *Mayflower II*. During these protests, young men and women from around the nation stepped forth with a dramatic display that would become synonymous with AIM's style of activism.

The 1970 takeover of Mount Rushmore began, like most actions with which AIM was involved, as a simple demonstration. A couple of Sioux elders were planning to protest the seizure of the Black Hills, which they felt was in violation of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie.³² The men organizing the protest sent an invitation to the American Indian Movement and AIM responded by sending a busload of members, including Russell Means and Dennis Banks.

When AIM members arrived at Mount Rushmore, they met the men planning the protest, as well as John Trudell, the representative sent from the group still occupying Alcatraz. After some initial discussion, Trudell proposed

³²Russell Means and Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), p. 167.

that the group simply climb to the top of the mountain and occupy it. The group, though ill prepared for such a feat, ascended the mountain and laid claim to it. The group persevered and members stayed in protest for several weeks, before finally leaving. According to Means, inclement weather finally ended the takeover.³³

AIM took another important step forward in 1970. It was during that year that members of the group first made contact with a segment of the American Indian community that would give them legitimacy in the urban communities from which the leadership had built its power base, as well as on the reservations that had previous been an untapped resource.

In 1970, Dennis Banks traveled to the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota in order to meet with Henry Crow Dog. Henry Crow Dog was the grandson of the Lakota leader Crow Dog, who garnered fame after killing Spotted Tail in 1881 and setting the stage for the federal government to pass the Major Crimes Act of 1885, which gave the government jurisdiction in major crimes on Indian reservations. Banks' trip to meet with Henry Crow Dog was intended to forge ties with the more tradition oriented American Indians living on reservations. The description

³³Ibid., pp. 167-170.

of this meeting given by Leonard Crow Dog, Henry's son, helps to illustrate the gap that existed between AIM and many of the reservation Indians they sought to gain as allies. Crow Dog writes:

My father asked, 'Are you a sun dancer?' Dennis said no.
My father asked, 'Have you ever purified yourself in a sweat lodge?' And again Dennis said no.
My father told him, 'Then I don't know why you have come.'
Dennis said, 'I live close to Pipestone. I can make red stone pipes.'
My father said, "Then we have something to talk about."³⁴

This initial meeting between Banks and Henry Crow Dog ended with Banks undergoing the ritual of purification in a sweat lodge. With the initial gap crossed, Banks and other AIM leaders developed a friendship with Henry Crow Dog. However, it was his son Leonard who became an ally and, more importantly, a spiritual advisor.

Following the actions at Mount Rushmore and the addition of a spiritual leader with the prestige of Leonard Crow Dog, AIM's reputation began to quickly grow. With the new fame came new styles of dress. Banks, Means, and many others began wearing their hair in traditional braids, as well as wearing traditional jewelry. For many young men

³⁴Leonard Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Crow Dog: Four Generations of Sioux Medicine Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 163.

and women, the mere sight of the AIM leaders was enough to inspire them.

As Thanksgiving of 1971 approached, members of the Boston American Indian community, as well as members of the Wampanoag, asked AIM to join them in a demonstration at Plymouth, Massachusetts.³⁵ AIM agreed and arrived in time for the Thanksgiving celebration that was being held at the restored Plymouth Plantation.

According to Russell Means, the Indian protestors arrived under the pretense that they were going to take part in the celebration. However, after they had been seated at banquet tables, the protestors began upending them, spilling the food. Means, Banks, and the others ran around the celebration site giving war whoops and generating great confusion and chaos. They next headed to Plymouth Rock to cover it with spit and trash before boarding and occupying the replica of the Mayflower that was anchored nearby.³⁶

The protestors finally left Plymouth after a fiery speech by Russell Means had been delivered and a large amount of media attention had been garnered. Later that

³⁵Means and Wolf, *Where White Men*, p. 175.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

night, members of the group, led by John Trudell, returned to Plymouth Rock and painted it red.³⁷

The actions of the American Indian Movement at Mount Rushmore and Plymouth helped spread the name and reputation of the movement. In 1971, members of AIM returned to Mount Rushmore for another protest, which helped sustain the movement's momentum. It was not until 1972, however, that AIM would achieve its first true success.

The first great victory of the American Indian Movement occurred in an unlikely place. It did not come at so visible a location as Alcatraz or the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington DC. It occurred in a small town by the name of Gordon, Nebraska. This first victory did not begin with a protest of land seizure, nor did it involve a demonstration aimed at reinstating a once violated treaty. Instead, it began with the controversial death of a middle aged Oglala Sioux named Raymond Yellow Thunder.

According to the FBI file, Raymond Yellow Thunder, a 51-year-old Oglala Sioux from the Pine Ridge reservation, was picked up on the night of February 12, 1972, by Leslie D. Hare, Melvin P. Hare, Bernard Jerome Lutter, and Robert

³⁷Ibid., p. 178.

Richard Bayliss.³⁸ The men proceeded to abuse Yellow Thunder physically by hitting him in the face, then kicking and stomping him while he was lying on the ground.

After beating Yellow Thunder, the men then escorted him to the American Legion Club. They then stripped him to the waist and forced him inside during a crowded dance. After Yellow Thunder managed to leave the American Legion building, he was again picked up by the four men and forced into the trunk of their car. After riding around for a while the group released Yellow Thunder and returned his clothes to him.³⁹

After being released by his captors, Raymond Yellow Thunder proceeded to the Gordon Police Department and asked to be given a place to sleep for the night. According to the FBI report, the officer on duty saw that Yellow Thunder had been beaten and offered to send for medical help. Yellow Thunder refused the medical attention and left the police station at 7:00 a.m. the next morning.⁴⁰

At some point between February 13th and February 18th, Raymond Yellow Thunder sat down behind the wheel of a

³⁸"Demonstration by American Indians at Gordon, Nebraska, March 6-8, 1972," reprinted in Rolland Dewing, *The FBI Files on the American Indian Movement and Wounded Knee* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), pp. 1-2.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

pickup truck parked on a used car lot. It was there that he was found dead on February 20th. The investigation that followed revealed that Yellow Thunder had died "on or before February 17, 1972, the cause of death being a cerebral hemorrhage, probably caused by a blow to the head."⁴¹ The men who picked Yellow Thunder up on the night of February 12th were arrested and charged with manslaughter and false imprisonment, because it appeared that he had finally died because of the beatings they had given him.

Following the discovery of Yellow Thunder's body, rumors began to circulate among the American Indian communities around Gordon. Stories reported that the Oglala Sioux had been mutilated and castrated by his assailants. Others said that the man's skull had been completely crushed after his attackers forced him to dance for their amusement in the American Legion Hall.⁴² Michael V. Smith, the county attorney for the Gordon area, repeatedly stated that these stories were untrue, but fuel had been thrown on the fire and the American Indian Movement was called in to see that Yellow Thunder's attackers were dealt with in a manner that satisfied the American Indian community.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 3.

⁴²Ibid., p. 4.

In early March 1972, AIM held a series of meetings on the Pine Ridge reservation to garner support for the protests they planned to stage in Gordon. According to Russell Means, they would go to Gordon "to demand justice for the killers...to expose white racism, and to serve notice that Indians would no longer accept whatever the white man handed out when it included degradation and murder."⁴³ Michael V. Smith attended a Pine Ridge meeting on March 6th, where the leaders presented him with a list of demands.

The demands stated that first degree murder and kidnapping charges must be filed against all involved with Yellow Thunder's death; that a Federal Grand Jury investigate Gordon area law enforcement; that Smith, as well as the local highway patrol supervisor, the sheriff, and the Gordon police chief be removed; and that Yellow Thunder's body be exhumed and undergo another autopsy.⁴⁴ While Smith agreed with and even welcomed some of the demands, he also advised those at the meeting that there was no way that first degree murder or kidnapping charges would ever make it into court under Nebraska laws.⁴⁵

⁴³Means and Wolf, *Where White Men*, p. 196.

⁴⁴"Demonstration by American Indians at Gordon, Nebraska, March 6-8, 1972", reprinted in Dewing, *FBI Files*, p. 8.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* p. 9.

In the end, negotiation failed and a group of several hundred protestors led by the American Indian Movement converged on Gordon, Nebraska. After several days of protest, the first signs of progress could be seen. A second autopsy was conducted, though it upheld the verdict of the first and showed that no mutilation of the body had occurred. Despite these revelations, the group of protestors had won a major victory. A human rights commission was created in Gordon, a police officer suspected of misconduct was suspended, and the murder was to be thoroughly investigated by Smith, as well as by the Department of the Interior and the Justice Department.⁴⁶

The American Indian Movement emerged from the Gordon protests with a newfound respect both in the urban Indian communities and on the reservations. They had taken the all too familiar case of a dead Indian in a town bordering a reservation and seen that the case was not just swept under the rug. While the protestors might have failed to have the manslaughter and false imprisonment charges bumped up to the first degree murder and kidnapping charges that they would have liked, the matter was ultimately resolved in a manner that was at least satisfactory to all the various parties involved.

⁴⁶Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 116.

After the events at Gordon were resolved, the leaders of the American Indian Movement began planning a new protest. They wanted to make a statement that could not be easily overlooked. They wanted to make sure that the federal government would hear what they had to say. By the beginning of November 1972, these desires were fulfilled. By November of 1972, the American Indian Movement had taken control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, DC.

CHAPTER 3

THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

The success of the American Indian Movement's protests at Gordon, Nebraska gave the group new energy and new momentum. However, AIM was not content to rest on its laurels. The leadership began searching for a way in which to follow up on the Gordon protests. The answer was presented in 1972 during a ceremony at the residence of Leonard Crow Dog.

The Sun Dance is a sacred ceremony that has been practiced in some form or fashion by many different American Indian tribes. During the ceremony, those involved pierce their skin with bone needles that are attached by cord to a central pole, or heavy buffalo skulls. The ritual is completed when the "dancers" pull themselves free by ripping the needle out of his/her flesh. The sacrifice of flesh and suffering of pain is considered sacred.

In August 1972, many of the leaders from various Indian groups gathered either at Crow Dog's residence for the Sun Dance itself, or at the annual fair on the Rosebud reservation where Crow Dog lived. During the meetings that took place between the leaders after the Sun Dance was

completed, Robert Burnette, a former tribal chairman at Rosebud, proposed to Dennis Banks that they organize a march on Washington, DC by American Indians from across the nation. It was hoped that this march would be the Indian equivalent of the 1963 march by African-American activists.⁴⁷

By October of 1972, large caravans of American Indians began forming and traveling towards Washington under the name Trail of Broken Treaties. Russell Means recalls the journey across country as a time of bold actions by the large groups of Indians. The towns in which some of the groups stopped were subjected to what Means calls AIM shopping. This basically meant that large groups of AIM members would walk into a store and take what they wanted, without bothering to pay.⁴⁸

After a short stop in St. Paul, Minnesota to draft a statement of purpose that became known as the Twenty Points, the caravans continued into Washington. A few days before the November elections, the Trail arrived in the nation's capital.

⁴⁷Vine Deloria, Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), pp. 46-47.

⁴⁸Means and Wolf, *Where White Men*, p. 225.

Almost as soon as the caravans arrived, things began to go wrong. The leaders of the Trail had started out under the impression that the group's point men in Washington had arranged adequate accommodations for the members of the group. Upon arriving in Washington, it was discovered that this was not the case. Some of those who made the trip spent their first night in Washington in a run down church in a slum. Cold weather and rats plagued the men and women who spent the night there.⁴⁹

On the morning of November 3rd, the Trail of Broken Treaties converged on the Bureau of Indian Affairs building. The leaders of the caravan met with BIA officials and began making arrangements to accommodate the group while they remained in Washington. As the day wore on and tensions began to heighten, a conflict developed between the Indians inside the BIA building and police officers sent to keep an eye on the situation.⁵⁰ The conflict ended with the occupation of the BIA building by the Trail of Broken Treaties.

The days that followed were eventful, to say the least. The Indian occupiers of the building were involved in several conflicts with police officers. They erected a

⁴⁹Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, p. 85.

⁵⁰Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, pp. 154-155

tepee on the front lawn. They wrapped themselves in upside down American flags. They painted graffiti on the interior walls and they found time to confiscate enormous amounts of the BIA's files.

The Nixon administration was anxious to end the occupation as soon as possible because the 1972 election was quickly approaching. To this end, White House representatives negotiated an end to the standoff by agreeing to examine the Twenty Points and issuing a point-by-point response. In addition, funds were provided to cover travel expenses for members of the group's homeward journey.⁵¹

In the end, the Trail of Broken Treaties accomplished more than the theft of BIA files, although not necessarily in a positive sense. Following the takeover, the FBI began much closer surveillance of the American Indian Movement. The FBI had monitored the group, to some degree, since the 1968 meetings during which it had been formed. However, in those earliest investigations, the FBI was looking only for possible connections between AIM and communist organizations.⁵² Following the BIA takeover, the FBI

⁵¹White House memo reprinted in Dewing, *FBI Files*.

⁵²FBI memo reprinted in Dewing, *FBI Files*.

labeled AIM as an extremist group with the potential for violent action and began much closer surveillance.

The new attention from law enforcement did not end with the FBI. It also extended to local law enforcement. Just after the BIA takeover, Leonard Peltier, a security chief for the Trail, was provoked into a fight by two undercover officers in Milwaukee. Peltier was arrested for his involvement in the affair. It was later revealed that the officers were looking to bring in a member of AIM and Peltier had happened to fit the bill.⁵³ Peltier's account of this incident was verified in court records.

Perhaps the only somewhat positive aspect of the BIA occupation was the fulfillment of the White House promise to issue a point-by-point response to the Trail's demands. However, the responses issued to the Twenty Points were far from pleasing to most American Indians. While the Nixon administration agreed that some of the points were valid, the White House response also indicates that many of the demands were based either on misinterpretations of United States law or stood in direct opposition to the wishes of American Indian tribes as adopted by referendum.⁵⁴ The

⁵³Peltier, *Prison Writings*, pp. 104-106.

⁵⁴White House Response to the Twenty Points reprinted in Akwesasne Notes, *BIA I'm Not Your Indian Anymore* (Rooseveltown, New York: Akwesasne Notes, 1974), pp. 63-88.

ultimate result of the Trail of Broken Treaties was disappointment.

Following the Trail of Broken Treaties, the American Indian Movement continued in its role of champion of Indian Rights. In early January 1973, Darld Schmitz, a white man, stabbed a young Sioux named Wesley Bad Heart Bull. When Bad Heart Bull died and Schmitz was charged with manslaughter, AIM responded as they had in the Yellow Thunder case. Despite Bad Heart Bull's extremely checkered past, AIM led protestors converged on the town of Custer, South Dakota to ensure that justice would come to the killer.

The FBI account of the events in Custer stated that at approximately 4:45 in the afternoon, a group of Indians entered Custer and joined with a number of Indians already in town. The group proceeded to the Custer County Courthouse, where they were informed that Bad Heart Bull's murderer had been charged with manslaughter rather than murder. In the confusion that followed, around 175 American Indians led by Means and Banks stormed the courthouse.⁵⁵ After only a short time, state and local

⁵⁵FBI Teletype from 2-6-73 reprinted in Dewing, *FBI Files*.

police were able to drive the AIM members from the courthouse, but a battle between the two groups began in the streets of Custer.

When all was said and done, Custer lay in ruins. The Chamber of Commerce building had been burned to the ground by the AIM protestors. The courthouse had been damaged by fire but was still standing. Two police cars had been destroyed and around a dozen AIM members, including Russell Means, were arrested.⁵⁶

AIM's actions at Custer, following so closely on the heels of the BIA takeover, demonstrated the violence and daring of which the group was capable. Ultimately, Bad Heart Bull's killer was acquitted of the charges against him, due primarily to AIM's actions at Custer and the standoff at Wounded Knee that began just over a month later.

For AIM, 1973 proved to be a pivotal year. The protest members had planned for Custer had degenerated into an all out street fight with police and the burning of two buildings, which had tarnished their image. Despite this setback, AIM had little time to lick their wounds. Around the end of February, AIM received a request for help from

⁵⁶Ibid.

residents of the Pine Ridge reservation and responded in force.

The years preceding the occupation of Wounded Knee were exceedingly hard for the residents of the Pine Ridge reservation. The men and women living there were split between those who supported the tribal government under Dick Wilson and those who supported AIM. Frequent acts of violence ranging from beatings to murders plagued Pine Ridge as tensions between the two groups often found undesirable outlets. Wilson's opponents claimed that he was mounting brutal campaigns of oppressions with his special police force, commonly known as GOON squads (Guardians of the Oglala Nation). Wilson claimed that he was trying to keep the peace on the reservation.

This was the tinderbox that AIM's occupation force entered. In late February 1973, around 300 AIM members and allies occupied the Wounded Knee massacre site on the Pine Ridge reservation. Within a span of hours, federal agents and detachments of military personnel began arriving to lay siege to Wounded Knee.

The occupation soon degenerated into a standoff as armored personnel carriers were brought in and bunkers were dug around Wounded Knee. Gun battles erupted periodically as it became clear that the occupiers would not leave

peacefully. The federal force present hoped to cut off food and transportation, so as to starve out the occupation force. This was unsuccessful. Runners went out under the cover of night to forage for food or to lead supply groups into the besieged area. As this method was eventually slowed to a trickle of supplies, more desperate measures were required. In April, three planes flew over the siege area and airdropped supplies into the AIM occupiers. These were the first supplies that had reached Wounded Knee in weeks.⁵⁷

During the course of the 71-day standoff, federal agents tried to end the siege time and again through force and psychological warfare but continually failed. In the end, negotiations were enough to precipitate a stand down. The agreement reached between the occupiers and government officials stated that Indian leaders would be able to present their grievances and that no one would be formally arrested for their actions at Wounded Knee. The last part of the agreement was violated almost immediately after the stand down took place. Hundred of people were checked for

⁵⁷Bill Zimmerman, *Airlift to Wounded Knee* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1976), pp. 241-267.

outstanding warrants and taken into custody and most of the AIM leadership was brought to trial.⁵⁸

Dennis Banks and Russell Means were chosen to stand trial together in St. Paul. The trial backfired, however, as Banks and Means were allowed to reveal conditions at Pine Ridge. The charges against the two were dismissed due to the overwhelming evidence of government misconduct. The Banks-Means trial was a short-lived victory, however. Most who were tried after Wounded Knee spent at least some time in prison and the sheer cost of defending its members financially devastated the movement.⁵⁹

While Wounded Knee provided an ultimate expression of Indian discontent, it gave the movement's opposition the opportunity to fight back. Even though the case can be made that the Wounded Knee occupation was the most important symbol of American Indian life in the 20th century, it marked the beginning of the end for the American Indian Movement.

⁵⁸Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, pp. 215-217.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 271-279.

CHAPTER 4

TWO TRAGEDIES

In the wake of the Wounded Knee occupation and trials, the tide began to swiftly turn against the men and women of the American Indian Movement. The FBI, which had previously monitored AIM to see if they had connections to communist groups, began actively to infiltrate the movement. Leaders with outstanding warrants were brought to trial for past transgressions. Those who eluded custody, such as Dennis Banks, were effectively exiled and cut off from the organization that they were supposed to be leading.

The movement began to falter and break apart as the sheer amount of litigation brought against its members taxed the group's resources. The exposure of informants in the movement began to create an air of paranoia that led to the break down of communication and the spread of distrust among even the top echelon of AIM's leadership. The fragile relationships that had given the movement direction and some semblance of solidarity quickly eroded as distance and pressure caused old grievances to flare back into existence.

Out of the turmoil of the American Indian Movement's decline come the two most tragic stories of the group's short history. In the years that have passed since AIM ceased to exist as a national organization, these two stories have endured as symbols of injustice to which men and women from all races and all nationalities still rally. The first story is that of the imprisonment of Leonard Peltier. The second story is the tragic death of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash.

In 1975, a group of AIM members, including Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash and Leonard Peltier, were sent to the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. While there, they were charged with defending the land and its residents from harassment. Peltier had long been affiliated with AIM and had served as a security chief during the Trail of Broken Treaties.⁶⁰ He had met Aquash during her time with AIM and the two became friends. In 1975, a firefight between FBI agents and AIM members at the Jumping Bull property would send Peltier to prison and lead to Aquash's death.

Perhaps no other event from the era of the American Indian Movement has remained in the news as long as the imprisonment of Leonard Peltier. Each year, countless petitions and pleas for clemency are begun in the hopes of

⁶⁰Peltier, *Prison Writings*, pp. 99-102.

ending this symbol of unjust persecution. Each year, Leonard Peltier continues to sit in jail, serving two life sentences for murders he never committed.

Leonard Peltier was born on September 12, 1944, in Grand Forks, North Dakota, to a family of migrant workers who shared blood with the Sioux and Chippewa.⁶¹ Like many Indian youths, Peltier was raised to a large degree by his grandparents. Also like many Indian youths, Peltier found himself in scrapes with law enforcement officials and racists.

After holding a number of jobs, Peltier was introduced to the struggles of the American Indian communities during the fishing rights protests in the Pacific Northwest. Peltier took part in the takeover of Fort Lawton, where he met delegates of the Alcatraz occupation. In 1970, Peltier met members of the American Indian Movement and ended up joining the group. In 1972, Peltier took part in the Trail of Broken Treaties as a security chief.⁶²

Following the takeover of the BIA building in Washington, Peltier was involved in a fight with undercover police officers that led to a stint in jail. Embroiled in

⁶¹Matthiessen, *Crazy Horse*, p. 41.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 49-57.

legal matters, Peltier was unable to join the occupation of Wounded Knee but continued to work with AIM in the years that followed. It was thus that Peltier found himself on Jumping Bull land at the end of June 1975.

June 26, 1975, began just like any other morning for the AIM members present at the Jumping Bull property. Peltier remembers sleeping until midday and then lying in his sleeping bag while listening to the women talk outside his tent.⁶³ The morning drastically changed in a matter of moments as gunfire rang out.

That morning, two FBI agents had driven onto the Jumping Bull property, allegedly pursuing a young man accused of stealing a pair of cowboy boots. Shots were exchanged between the FBI agents and AIM members. The gun battle escalated as more law enforcement agents began to arrive. At some point during the battle, the two FBI agents were shot and killed at close range. One AIM member was also killed during the firefight. Seeing that the agents were dead, the AIM members fled the scene, escaping through the hills.⁶⁴

Following the gun battle, one of the largest manhunts in U.S. history began. In the end, four men were charged

⁶³Peltier, *Prison Writings*, p. 123.

⁶⁴FBI Teletype reproduced in Dewing, *FBI Files*.

with the murder of the two FBI agents. Robert Robideau and Dino Butler were brought to trial in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. During the trials that followed, the two were acquitted of the murder charges, leaving only Peltier and Jimmy Eagle to stand trial.⁶⁵

In the FBI documents concerning the Peltier case, it becomes evident that they were actively seeking to charge him with the murders. In a July 16th, 1975 Teletype, the FBI states its intent to "lock Peltier...into this case."⁶⁶

Peltier was apprehended by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in February 1976. In the extradition hearings that followed, a woman named Myrtle Poor Bear testified that she had seen Peltier kill the two FBI agents at the Jumping Bull property. She also testified that she was Peltier's girlfriend. Later, Poor Bear stated that the FBI had coerced her into pointing the finger at Peltier. It was also revealed that she had never met him.⁶⁷

Despite these facts, Peltier was extradited from Canada and set to face trial on charges of first-degree murder. In preparation for the up-coming trial, the FBI

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶FBI Teletype reprinted in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 272.

⁶⁷Peltier, *Prison Writings*, pp. 141-142.

ordered an analysis of the trial that had led to the acquittal of Robideau and Butler. The intent of this analysis was to ensure that the mistakes made in that trial would not be repeated in the Peltier trial. Among the possible reasons given for the acquittal were the court's allowance of testimony "concerning past activities of the FBI relating to the COINTELPRO" and the allowance of documents from which "the defense inferred the FBI created a climate of fear on the reservation which precipitated the murders."⁶⁸

After reviewing the previous mistakes, it was the decision of the FBI to drop the charges filed against Jimmy Eagle so that the "full prosecutive weight of the Federal Government could be directed against Leonard Peltier."⁶⁹ In the trial that followed, Peltier was convicted of the two murders, even though evidence existed to acquit him.

One of the most damaging pieces of evidence in the case against Peltier was an AR-15 rifle that had been taken from Robideau's car. When the scene of the murders had been investigated, a .223 caliber shell casing was found in the trunk of one of the agent's cars. The AR-15, which is a

⁶⁸FBI analysis of Robideau and Butler trials, reprinted in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers*, p. 285.

⁶⁹FBI memo reprinted in Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO Papers*, p. 287.

.223 caliber weapon, was thought to have been the weapon that killed the FBI agents. Thus, efforts were made to connect that rifle with Peltier. However, in ballistics tests that followed, it was determined that the rifle recovered from Robideau's car was not the weapon that fired the bullet at the murder scenes.⁷⁰

Despite these facts, and many other inconsistencies in the case against Peltier, such as the retraction of Poor Bear's testimony, he was convicted and sentenced to two life sentences to run consecutively. Despite the new evidence revealed by declassified FBI documents, Peltier still sits in prison. He is a man wrongly convicted of murder. He is a symbol of the backlash that destroyed the American Indian Movement.

The tragedy of Leonard Peltier's story does not end with his imprisonment. Peltier's story also affected the life of Anna Mae Aquash.

On the morning of February 24, 1976, Roger Amiotte, a South Dakota rancher whose land adjoins the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, walked across his farm as he might have done on any other morning. Amiotte was looking at an area through which he was planning to build a new fence. As he

⁷⁰FBI Teletype reprinted in Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO Papers*, p. 296.

surveyed the area, he made an unusual and disturbing discovery. At the bottom of a ravine near a road, Amiotte discovered the body of young woman. The body was laying face down in the snow, already showing signs of decomposition and damage by animals.⁷¹

Upon discovering the body, Amiotte immediately returned to his home and called the authorities. Later that day, members of the local sheriff's department arrived on the scene, along with members of the Tribal Police from Pine Ridge Reservation and FBI agents. An investigation of the area produced only two pieces of evidence. A hair clasp and several bits of hair were found at the top edge of the ravine. Officials concluded that the young woman had fallen over the edge and took the body into custody, pending an autopsy.⁷²

The first doctor to examine the body was Dr. Steven Shanker at the Public Health Hospital in Pine Ridge. After a cursory examination of the body, Shanker began to suspect an unnatural death.⁷³ A sizable amount of blood was clotted in the woman's hair. Shanker stopped his examination,

⁷¹Johanna Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1978), p. 13-14.

⁷²Ibid., p. 14.

⁷³Ibid.

deferring to the examiner he knew would be dispatched by the appropriate law enforcement agency.

Dr. W.O. Brown, the Bureau of Indian Affairs pathologist responsible for such investigations, arrived to take a look at the body. After a brief examination, Brown determined the cause of death to be exposure. He decided that the young woman had probably gone to sleep while intoxicated and died due to the cold weather.⁷⁴ Brown's last act was to cut off the young woman's hands and turn them over to the FBI for fingerprint identification. The young woman could not be matched to any missing person reports in the area, so she was buried in a local cemetery and the hands were sent back to the FBI lab.⁷⁵

The FBI identified the young woman as Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, a Micmac Indian from Nova Scotia and a prominent member of the American Indian Movement. They notified the woman's family and exhumed the body from its South Dakota grave. Upon further investigation, it was determined that Aquash had been murdered. The clotted blood Shanker had found in Aquash's hair had been caused by a gunshot to the back of the head. It was at this point that a formal

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁷⁵Ibid.

murder investigation began. The case remains unsolved to this day.

Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash's murder has echoed throughout the years that have followed. Her life was as much as model for her people as her death was a symbol of the troubled times in which she live. There are many questions that remain to be answered. Who was Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash? What is the story of her life? How did she end up in the snow of South Dakota, so far from her home and family?

Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash was born on March 27, 1945, in the Micmac village of Shubenacadie in Nova Scotia. She was the eldest daughter of two Micmac Indians, Mary Ellen Pictou and Francis Thomas Levi. Anna Mae's father abandoned Mary Ellen before his daughter's birth, leaving the family in dire straits. Mary Ellen Pictou, like so many Indians of her time, had achieved only a third grade education and was poorly prepared for the trials and turmoil of raising a child alone.⁷⁶

After approximately four years of living in poverty, Mary Ellen Pictou married a man by the name of Noel Sapier. Sapier was also a Micmac Indian, though he chose to live in the traditional ways of this people. Though Sapier made

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 46-49.

little money, he had a profound influence on young Anna Mae by teaching her the traditions of the Micmac people.

Following Sapier's death in 1956, Aquash began attending a school off the Micmac reservation. She had excelled in the reservation schools but soon found that the constant racial harassment in the new school was more than she could take. Though Anna Mae tried to persevere and remain in school, her once exceptional grades plummeted. Difficulty found her once again when her mother abandoned her later that year. This time Anna Mae was forced to leave school and take a job as a migrant farm worker.⁷⁷

When Aquash was 17 years old, she and Jake Maloney moved to Boston, searching for a better life. Like many urban centers of the 1950s and 60s, Boston had a rather large Indian population, thus Aquash and Maloney found themselves with at least a minimal support network.

Maloney and Aquash eventually found work and moved in together. They had two daughters and soon decided to legally marry. Like many other Indians of the period, Maloney and Aquash migrated back and forth between the city and the reservation, still searching for the better life that seemed to elude them. It was during this time in her

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 53-54.

life that Aquash once more began learning about the Micmac culture and traditional ways of life.⁷⁸

By 1968, Indian communities were filled with young men and women like Aquash. Activist groups began to spring up across the nation, demanding that their people be treated fairly. It was not long before Aquash threw her hat into the activist arena.

During the late 60s, Aquash spent much of her time working within the Indian community in Boston. She volunteered for the Boston Indian Council, working with Indian youths. Aquash and her husband had separated by this time, so she poured more of herself into the community. It was through the Boston Indian Council that Aquash was first introduced to the American Indian Movement. Russell Means was leading a group of AIM members to Plymouth, Massachusetts to protest the 1970 Thanksgiving celebration. Aquash joined the protest and began a chapter of her life that would culminate in her death six years later.⁷⁹

Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash first became associated with the American Indian Movement during the 1970 Plymouth protests, but that was only the beginning of her

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 54-57.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 59.

involvement with the group. Following the Plymouth protest, Aquash went back to Boston before moving to Maine to work with a program known as TRIBES. This program was designed to teach children about their traditional Indian heritage and to instill pride in them.⁸⁰ The project was eventually terminated in 1972 due to a funding shortage.

Following her work in TRIBES, Aquash returned to Boston and worked on her own education. She attended Wheelock College and received high marks. Because of her success at Wheelock, Aquash was offered a scholarship to Brandeis College. Aquash turned down the scholarship, electing to continue her work in the Indian community. While in Boston, Aquash met a man named Nogeeshik Aquash. He was an artist and a Chippewa Indian from Ontario, Canada. Nogeeshik and Anna Mae began seeing one another, soon living together and raising Anna Mae's daughters.⁸¹

When the Trail of Broken Treaties reached Washington in November of 1972, Anna Mae and Nogeeshik were there. As the Trail of Broken Treaties ended, Anna Mae and Nogeeshik returned home to Boston. There they continued working within the Indian communities, but their stay would be short. Events in the west were picking up speed once more

⁸⁰Matthiessen, *Crazy Horse*, p. 110.

⁸¹Ibid.

and the couple soon found themselves in the midst of the greatest event in modern Indian history.

Upon hearing of the siege at Wounded Knee, Anna Mae and Nogeeshik Aquash left Massachusetts for South Dakota. The couple stayed at the home of Leonard Crow Dog for a few days while they helped take supplies to the occupation force. Eventually, Anna Mae and Nogeeshik went into Wounded Knee to stay for the duration of the stand off.⁸²

While at Wounded Knee, Ann Mae met Mary Brave Bird, who would later marry Leonard Crow Dog. The two became friends during the course of the siege and Aquash helped to deliver Mary's baby in one of the building at Wounded Knee.⁸³ In addition to delivering babies and dodging bullets during the constant gun battles, Aquash also found time to get married. She and Nogeeshik were married in a traditional Sioux ceremony conducted by Wallace Black Elk.⁸⁴

After seventy-one days, the stand off at Wounded Knee ended. The federal government promised once more to examine Indian grievances and the occupation force stood down. Many of those present at Wounded Knee were arrested, but all were "processed" (meaning that they were identified and checked for outstanding warrants).

⁸²Brand, *The Life and Death*, p. 62.

⁸³Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, pp. 138-139.

⁸⁴Matthiessen, *Crazy Horse*, p. 110.

Following Wounded Knee, Anna Mae and Nogeeshik went home to Boston and tried to start an AIM survival school. The venture failed and the two separated soon after. Anna Mae traveled to Ottawa and set up a cultural show at the National Arts Centre. All this was accomplished while intermittently attending the trial of Dennis Banks and Russell Means in St. Paul.⁸⁵

In 1974, Ann Mae began working in the St. Paul office of the American Indian Movement. Later that year, Aquash was sent to Los Angeles to set up an AIM office. While in Los Angeles, Aquash was in constant conflict with a newcomer to the movement. It was later discovered that this man, Douglass Durham, was an informant for the FBI. When the discovery was made, Durham fled and Aquash took over his role as unofficial public-relations director for AIM.⁸⁶

In 1975, Aquash and a number of AIM members were sent to the Pine Ridge Reservation to stay on the property of the Jumping Bull family. This group was charged with protecting the family from the violence that was still engulfing the reservation. The incidents that followed

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 110-111.

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 111-119.

would change Aquash's life. Unfortunately it was for the worse.

Following the incident at Oglala, Aquash began evading arrest. In September of 1975, she was hiding on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. On September 5th, FBI agents staged a raid on the reservation to serve warrants on several men involved in a fight a few days prior. During the raid, FBI agent David Price, who had taken Aquash into custody once prior to the Oglala shoot out, stumbled across her and arrested her once again. It was during this arrest that Price allegedly said that Anna Mae would not live through the year if she did not aid in the investigation of the Oglala shoot out.⁸⁷

Following the arrest at Rosebud, Aquash was formally charged for having a gun with the serial number removed. She demanded that she be allowed to contact a lawyer but was informed that she was to be questioned about the Oglala shoot out. Anna Mae was eventually released, but due to a miscommunication with the defense committee handling her case, she failed to appear for her court date and a bench warrant was issued for her arrest.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Brand, *The Life and Death*, pp. 130-133.

⁸⁸Ibid.

In November of 1975, the FBI in Oregon was alerted to look for a motor home that allegedly carried the fugitive AIM members Dennis Banks and Leonard Peltier. When the motor home was located and stopped, Aquash and Kamook Banks were taken into custody, but the motor home and an unidentified man escaped. Anna Mae was transported to South Dakota from Oregon so that she could stand trial on the charges from the Rosebud raid in September. She was released to her lawyer after the initial hearing but, not wanting to risk standing trial, she escaped and disappeared.⁸⁹

During the period between her November escape and her murder, Aquash was hiding out with a friend in the Denver area. Investigators now believe that at some point shortly before her death, Aquash was kidnapped from her Denver hideout. She was then taken to South Dakota where she was held for at least twenty-four hours before she was shot in an execution style and dumped into the ravine where she was found.⁹⁰

So the tale has come full circle. After the kidnapping and murder, Roger Amiotte discovered Anna Mae's

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 134-139

⁹⁰Trace DeMeyer, "Aquash Murder Case Goes Online," *News From Indian Country* (News From Indian Country, 1999), www.indiancountrynews.com/aquashonline.html. Accessed on 4/25/2001.

body in the ravine. Immediately after the identification of the body, some AIM members indicated that the FBI had caused the murder of Aquash. The FBI, in turn, accused AIM of having perpetrated the crime.

In the investigation that has taken place since that time, it seems as if all evidence indeed points to AIM, rather than the FBI. In 1999, a press conference was held in Denver to discuss the case of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash. One of the prominent figures present at that press conference was former AIM leader Russell Means.

Means began to speak out about the case at that particular press conference and has since followed up on his website with several statements about the case. It is the opinion of Means that members of the AIM leadership ordered the murder of Aquash under the impression that she was an informant for the FBI.⁹¹

Means goes on to claim that three people carried out the kidnapping and murder on the orders of Vernon Bellecourt. Means said that the three people who perpetrated the crime would have never acted without direct orders from the top echelon of AIM. Means elaborated on two scenarios that could have caused Bellecourt to order

⁹¹Russell Means, "Notes From Russell Means," *Treaty Productions Homepage*, www.russellmeans.com/russell.html. Accessed on 4/25/2001.

the murder. One concluded that Bellecourt became paranoid due to the excessive FBI scrutiny AIM was receiving at that particular period. This paranoia was heightened "by his use of drugs and alcohol."⁹² With this foundation set, Means feels that Bellecourt heard the rumors that Aquash was an informant and overreacted by ordering her murder.

The second scenario that Means outlined is more complicated. He believed that Bellecourt himself could very well have been an informant for the FBI. In this scenario, Means speculated that Aquash could have discovered the truth about Bellecourt's position, thus Bellecourt painted Aquash as an informant first.⁹³

Means points out that during AIM actions in New Mexico in 1975, Bellecourt ordered Dino Butler, Robert Robideau, and Leonard Peltier to isolate Aquash and question her. His orders stated that if they thought she was an informant, they should terminate her.⁹⁴ This incident was also recounted by Peltier in his prison writings.

While it is important to note that Means and the Bellecourts have a very checkered relationship with one another, evidence does seem to indicate that AIM members were responsible for Aquash's death. In the spring of

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

1999, Detective Abe Alonzo of the Denver Police Department, who had become involved with the investigation into the Aquash murder, posted an article on the Indian Country New website. In this article, Alonzo verifies that since 1994, the investigation has led to three members of the American Indian Movement.⁹⁵ Though Means' accusations against Bellecourt may not be entirely accurate, his belief that members of AIM executed Aquash has seemingly been substantiated.

The idea that Aquash was an informant had been floating around since Douglass Durham had become involved in AIM. Durham, who was an informant for the FBI, used the old tactic of "bad-jacketing" to cast suspicion on Aquash. Infiltrators use this tactic, which consists of claiming that members of a group are informants, to sully the reputation of high-ranking members of the organization that they have entered. During the time Durham and Aquash were in Los Angeles, Durham consistently tried to undermine the work that Aquash was doing, while starting rumors that she was an informant.⁹⁶

⁹⁵Abe Alonzo, "24 Years Ago It Was Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash," www.indiancountrynews.com/aquashabealonzo.html. Accessed on 4-25-2001.

⁹⁶Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret War Against the Black Panther*

When it became readily apparent that Durham himself was a traitor, these suspicions might have subsided, but they did not. Russell Means noticed that, if anything, the revelation of Durham's snitch status only served to heighten the paranoia in AIM, even with such figures as Dennis Banks.⁹⁷

The fact that Aquash was twice arrested after the Oglala shoot out also served to heighten suspicions about her. Many commented on the fact that she was the first to be released after the Rosebud raid in September of 1975. Others commented that Aquash seemed to receive special treatment while in FBI custody. Of course this could be attributed to the fact that she was close to Banks and Peltier, who were both high on the FBI's wanted list. However, many also commented on the apparent ease with which Aquash escaped after her arrest in Oregon and transportation back to South Dakota.⁹⁸ Whether or not the allegations against Aquash were true, they are critically important because they seem to have led to her death.

In February of 1976, Anna Mae Aquash was found lying in a ravine. In life she had worked tirelessly for the

Party and the American Indian Movement (Boston: Southend Press, 1990), pp. 211-215.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 216.

⁹⁸Brand, *The Life and Death*, pp. 138-139.

betterment of her people, even when her life and freedom were placed in jeopardy. The tragic end of this woman's life has reverberated throughout the years that have followed that snowy February day. The FBI cannot be held blameless in her death, because it seems that the murder was motivated by the rumors its informant spread. After all the years that had passed, it is known that it was not an agent of the FBI who pulled the trigger and sent Anna Mae tumbling into a ravine. However, it seems that it was her own people who killed her.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In 1968, a group of Chippewa Indians met in Minneapolis, Minnesota to discuss the problems plaguing their communities. From that meeting emerged an organization that demanded national attention for the better part of the six years that followed. This organization was named the American Indian Movement.

In 1970, AIM embarked on a series of protests that were designed to draw attention to the realities of life as an American Indian. By exposing these realities, AIM hoped to force the federal government to act in addressing the problems presented.

In reality, the idealistic dreams of the men and women who flocked to AIM's banner died hard deaths. The radical protests that they thought would help their cause, while they did garner much media attention and support, actually caused more harm than good in the long run. With daring feats like the occupation of the BIA building and Wounded Knee, AIM captured the attention, if only for a while, of the nation. However, they also captured the attention of the FBI. In response to the extreme acts of the American Indian Movement, the FBI offered infiltrations, smear

campaigns within AIM, and the manufacturing of evidence that could jail its members.

As the pressure from outside increased, the fabric of AIM began to fray and tear. The fragile leadership of the movement cracked and then scattered as paranoia and the rigors of prosecution did their work. While AIM's leadership might have failed to stay together under ordinary circumstances, the FBI's campaign against them ensured that they would not have that chance. Things became so heated that Carter Camp, a leader in the movement, actually shot Clyde Bellecourt during a fight on the Rosebud Reservation in August 1973.⁹⁹

In the final years of AIM's national prominence, Dennis Banks lived in effective exile in California before finally facing the legal troubles from which he was hiding. The majority of the other leaders found themselves serving at least some time in jail as a wave of litigation followed on the heels of the Wounded Knee occupation. This was simply one more facet of AIM's death as a national organization.

Today, chapters of the American Indian Movement still exist, scattered across the country. However, AIM has no official governing body on the national level, nor do their

⁹⁹Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, p. 270.

recent exploits compare to those undertaken by the pioneers of the movement. Today, it seems, most AIM members are content to protest the destruction of important sites or to spend time teaching children how to fish in traditional ways. There are no more occupations of buildings in Washington, DC. There are no more 71-day standoffs.

For most men and women, the American Indian Movement, when remembered at all, is remembered perhaps for the Wounded Knee standoff, or wrongly associated with the occupation of Alcatraz. The majority of the population has long forgotten the BIA occupation and the actions at Plymouth and Mount Rushmore. With the recent exposure Leonard Peltier has received through the music of popular bands, new groups of young men and women have been introduced to at least one part of AIM's story, but for most, that is as far as their interests go.

For years to come scholars, as well as American Indians, will continue to debate the ultimate significance of the American Indian Movement. Some will say that AIM unified the tribes, if only for a little while, and laid a foundation for future pan-Indian movements. Others will say that the theatrical, and often criminal, displays AIM provided with their protests only damaged the American Indian communities rather than help them.

Regardless of the movement's significance stands one undeniable truth. In the years between 1970 and 1973, the American Indian Movement staged a series of dramatic protests. In the end, it was these protests that led to the movement's downfall.

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