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AIM & the Occupation of Alcatraz Island

Victoria Juarez

While often overlooked in the overarching frame of social unrest that plagued the 1960s and 1970s, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was a pivotal part of this period of social change. Since the earliest foundations of this country, American Indians have been fighting to maintain their land, culture, and rights against the constraints of the U.S. government. AIM represented the frustrations of American Indians for hundreds of years and decisively used the public conflict of the time to make the plight of these people known to the general public. The American Indian occupation of Alcatraz was intended to raise awareness of the cruelty American indigenous people faced in the form of federal policies but was unsuccessful in portraying these grievances through popular media. However, the Alcatraz occupation did have a lasting effect on the lives of American indigenous people and acted as the catalyst for new perceptions of self-determination and liberation. Because of the occupation of Alcatraz, the Red Power movement took hold as a legitimate social movement during an era of changing perceptions and attitudes.

In 1969, a group of American Indians took over the federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay and laid claim to it by ‘right of discovery’ in an effort to expose the suffering of American Indians. The occupants cited the Sioux Treaty of 1868, which implied that vacated federal lands could be occupied by American Indians, and thus began a 19-month standoff against the U.S. government.¹ The occupants were made up of mostly Native American university students, who studied at institutions in California and adopted the name ‘The Indians of All Tribes’ as tribute to the American Indians who were living on reservations across the country, in addition to those living in Canada and South America.²

A major part of the occupation was spreading awareness of the difficulty of an often overlooked and manipulated group of people through

¹ David Milner, “‘By Right of Discovery’: The Media and the Native American Occupation of Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 1 (July 2014): 73.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

more popular modes of media, including television and radio. On November 11, 1969, protesters read their ‘Proclamation to the Great White Father and all his People,’ which was broadcasted by San Francisco’s KPIX-TV.³ The proclamation “saw the occupying forces offer to buy Alcatraz for ‘\$24 in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man’s purchase of a similar island three hundred years ago.’”⁴ Accompanying this offer was the stipulation that white inhabitants left on the island would be held under the responsibility of the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs; these people would also be offered “our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state.”⁵ The statement continued by comparing Alcatraz Island to the likes of a reservation: “it is isolated from modern facilities and without adequate means of transportation; it has no fresh running water, inadequate sanitation facilities, no oil or mineral rights, no industry...no healthcare or educational facilities.”⁶ This sarcastic yet extremely brutal rhetoric is used specifically to bring the struggles of American Indians to light by using the government’s own neglect to voice their grievances. The approach to engage the public through anti-government rhetoric did not last long, as more mainstream media often overlooked the perception of American Indians. Because of this overshadowing by non-American Indian reporters, the native voice was often lost or forgotten during the Alcatraz occupation and even moving forward into the Red Power Movement.

One of the most public forms of media during this time period was newspapers, which reported the entirety of the occupation movement from 1969-1971. An article from the *Desert Sun*, published on November 20, 1969, described the beginning of the occupation; “the Indians invaded Alcatraz today...proposing ‘profitable negotiation’ with the federal government on taking over the ‘Rock’ for an American Indian cultural center.”⁷ The article goes on to explain that the American Indians asserted

³ Ibid., 75.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Larry Salmon, “Taking Alcatraz,” *Third Force* 5, no. 3 (August 1997).

⁷ “Indians Uprising Again at Alcatraz,” *Desert Sun*, 20 November 1969, A1(M).

their right to occupy the island since it was currently not being used by the federal government. Before the occupation, several proposals were discussed regarding how the land should be used, including the idea to make the island into a “space-age museum” or “Disneyland-type amusement park.”⁸ Dean Chavers, a member of the Lumbee tribe, asserted in a news conference that the occupiers had the same right to take over the island as anybody else; ““They are out there for profitable negotiation. They have a legal and moral right to be there ...nobody is armed, nobody will be armed.””⁹ It was noted in the news article that one particular building on the island was decorated with numerous stickers that read “Custer Had It Coming.”¹⁰

While this news article appears to give a non-biased account of the events on November 20, 1969, it is clear that there is some negative sentiment towards the occupation of Alcatraz Island. The first indicator is the title of the article – “Indians Uprising Again at Alcatraz.” The use of the word uprising provokes feelings of violence and potential danger instead of the non-violent occupation that it was intended to be. Right from the start, the reader is influenced to read the article through a certain lens. The article compares the desire of American Indians to reclaim Alcatraz as land that is rightfully theirs in order to use it for a Native American cultural center to other petitions, such as using the land for an amusement park. This completely demeans the desires and goal of the occupiers to establish a center to promote American Indian culture and education, and trivializes it in comparison to using the land for capital gain. In addition to this petty comparison, it is also interesting to note that the author chooses to mention that a room in one of the abandoned buildings on the island is decorated with a sticker with the words “Custer Had It Coming.” While this is a seemingly insignificant comment, the author intentionally chooses to pick a detail that could be interpreted as portraying American Indians in a vengeful and resentful light. It could be argued that the wording on the sticker can be seen as forceful, but AIM interpreted their actions and slogan as justified since they were the true owners of the land that was wrongfully taken from them.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The inclusion of details such as the use of the sticker for decoration around the facilities concentrates the reader's attention on seemingly trivial facts about the occupation, taking away from the much larger picture.

Two days later, on November 22, 1969, the *Desert Sun* published another article titled "Indians Still Squat On Alcatraz Island," which illustrated that 120 occupiers continued to occupy Alcatraz Island. The article opens with a statement on the occupier's slogan, "this land is my land" and notes that "the young American Indians occupying Alcatraz Island have adopted it as their battle cry."¹¹ The author explains that "the phrase was painted on a sign roped across the back of the statue of an eagle which decorate[d] the doorway..." of one of the abandoned cellblocks on the island.¹² This building is one from which the occupiers have "vowed" that the government will have to "flush them out."¹³ The article goes on to describe one altercation between the Coast Guard and a group of "squatters;" "A brief skirmish took place in the bay Friday when a Coast Guard cutter tried to attack a tow line to a Chinese junk laden with Indian sympathizers...the sympathizers promptly cut the tow lines..."¹⁴ It is also reiterated that the occupiers want to use the abandoned land to build a Native American cultural and education center. As with the news story written on November 20, the language used and details that were included create anti-occupier sentiment. The title portrays the American Indians as squatters instead of calling them occupiers, demonstrators, or another word that does not elicit the negative image that the word squatter evokes. The article's opening statement on the occupier's slogan, "this land is my land" hints at negative American Indian sentiment in addition to the conclusion the author draws when referring to it as a battle cry. Instead of using words such as slogan or mantra, the author chooses a word that is associated with a negative connotation. Using vocabulary such as the word "vow" and including a threatening statement regarding government take over once again contributes to the overall negative sentiments that the public already held towards American Indians. The portrayal of the federal government as

¹¹ "Indians Still Squat on Alcatraz Island," *Desert Sun*, 22 November 1969, A1(M).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

showing no inclination to act violently uses ethos to give a peaceful picture of the government versus the unruliness and potential danger that the occupiers on the island display. While it is notable that AIM was successful in having their cause talked about in newspapers, it was often times not portrayed in a favorable manner.

Since Alcatraz was federal property, the media publicity that the occupation acquired grabbed the attention of President Nixon's staff and policy-makers. In 1969, Robert Robertson, director of the National Council on Indian Opportunity (NCIO), was sent by the White House to Alcatraz Island in order to bargain with the occupiers.¹⁵ "When Robertson promised to build a park for the Indians on the island, the occupiers, calling themselves the 'Indians of All Tribes, Inc.' refused. They insisted upon...a cultural center."¹⁶ It is evident in this quote that at this point in the occupation, the federal government was extremely out of touch with the occupiers' demands and wanted to provide a quick fix rather than sitting down to listen to what the occupiers were hoping to accomplish through the movement. When bargaining with the group failed, Nixon's advisors urged the president to remain patient given the recent events at Kent State and the current social situation in the United States. The federal government ultimately did not end up intervening directly during the Alcatraz occupation, although moderate members of the Nixon administration "used the occupation to plead for changes in Indian policy."¹⁷ "The Alcatraz episode is symbolic...to the Indians and to us it is a *symbol* of the lack of attention to [their] unmet needs." stated one of Nixon's advisors.¹⁸ It is important to recognize that by the end of the occupation, at least part of the Nixon administration realized the importance of the occupation of Alcatraz; it was not simply a fight for a small piece of land, but was rooted in the lack of fair treatment they had received by the government long before 1969.

¹⁵ Dean J. Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest," *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (May 2003): 208.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In addition to gaining popularity through mainstream media, the occupiers on Alcatraz Island were also responsible for producing their own forms of media. This media was and has often been overlooked because of the widespread popularity of non-indigenous forms of media. “Outside coverage in mainstream newspapers...is much more readily accessible, and, since it reached larger audiences, reflects mainstream responses to the occupation,” while sources such as the *Alcatraz Newsletter* have often been omitted.¹⁹ The newsletter, which was written and published by occupiers, was used to promote a united sense of identity and purpose amongst all American Indians, including those in South and Central America and Canada, and solidified the Alcatraz occupation as a legitimate political example of leadership and positive activism in the American Indian community.²⁰ The *Alcatraz Newsletter* shared perspectives on the Alcatraz occupation through six frameworks: unity, leadership, history, symbolism, legal and treaty rights, and conservation.²¹ Historian Rhiannon Bertaud-Gandar also reflects that statements given by occupiers or supporters of the movement that were written in mainstream newspapers were often “interpreted, reframed, and mediated by non-Indians” and [were] correspondingly written for “non-Indians” as well.²² While the *Alcatraz Newspaper* was not able to spread its message quite as wide as more mainstream forms of media, it is important in the scope of building a stronger sense of self-determination and influencing future activism.

The concept of self-determination appeared in the 1960s and became an established policy in the 1970s. While its meaning can be interpreted in a variety of ways, most American Indians agreed that the term was central to the idea that they needed to take control of their own lives and destinies.²³ “Tribal people desired self-determination because they maintained correctly that the Euro-Americans, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), had

¹⁹ Rhiannon Bertaud-Gandar, “Taking Claim,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 1 (July 2016): 127.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Steven J. Crum, “Indian Activism, the Great Society, Indian Self-Determination, and the Drive for an Indian College or University, 1964-71,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 31, no. 1 (2007): 2.

controlled the lives of Native people for more than a century.”²⁴ A large part of this control centered around education, as the BIA often encouraged native people to pursue education at a low-level vocational school rather than pursuing a higher form of education. In an effort to maintain their self-determination, “tribal people desired higher levels of education that included the creation of Native-run colleges and universities.”²⁵ Through various means, including education, self-determination represented the desire for native people to take control of their own lives and live free of government constraints. Whether or not it can be credited to the turbulent social changes during this time period, American Indian self-determination burst forward, creating a new policy that united native people under the same principle of liberation.

Through this empowering notion of self-determination, more research has been conducted into finding out the realities behind the Alcatraz occupation apart from the often-inadequate statements that were released in newspapers between 1969-1971. Edward Willie was a member of the Alcatraz occupation and traveled with his family from his home on a reservation to join occupiers in 1969. While Willie was only a young boy when he reached Alcatraz, he has been able to share the experiences of the movement.²⁶

It was like visiting with lost family...There was an instant connection, but at the time I was not sure of the source of that connection. It was not until years later that I was able to pinpoint the cause of the good feeling in my heart. I realized that this was the important ingredient that had been missing from our lives. They were our people: Indians, Indians, and more Indians.²⁷

Not only does Willie reflect on the day-to-day activities of his life on Alcatraz Island, but he also gives insight into the perceptions he felt as an American Indian standing in solidarity with other indigenous people who

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Edward Willie, “Rock Memories,” *News from Native California* 23, no. 4 (Summer 2010).

²⁷ Ibid.

supported the cause for self-determination and liberation. “Most importantly, though, my vision of Indians as bloodthirsty, war-whooping terrorists turned into a vision of family, community, and people struggling and laughing amidst great cultural changes.”²⁸ It is evident through Willie’s statement that even he, an American Indian, had become disillusioned by the vision of indigenous peoples that the media and the U.S. government presented to the public. The value of looking at a perspective such as Willie’s reveals the truth behind what was happening on Alcatraz Island and is able to offer a much deeper and emotional anecdote than a short piece in a newspaper.

Other American Indian voices from the occupation have also reflected on the power that the Alcatraz Occupation had in changing their perceptions about themselves, their people, and their culture. “If you wanted to make it in America as an Indian, you had to let them (the government and White American society) remold you. Alcatraz put me back into my community and helped me remember who I am,” said John Trudell, another member of the Alcatraz occupation.²⁹ Trudell was 23 when he moved to San Francisco to be part of the occupying movement, and was well known amongst the occupiers as the voice of *Radio Free Alcatraz*, a pirate station that broadcasted from the island with the help of local news stations.³⁰ Because Trudell was able to reach so many people, he was able to garner support for the occupation from celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Marlon Brando, in addition to support from the general public.³¹ Trudell used his voice to become a leading member of the occupation movement and continued to be a figurehead of the Red Power movement through the early 2000s. The narratives of American Indians such as Edward Willie and John Trudell are increasingly important, especially when attempting to gain a comprehensive perspective of the Alcatraz occupation. It is through their testimonies that evidence can be presented regarding the power the occupation had in shaping the policy of self-determination and indigenous liberation for future generations.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ben Winton, “Alcatraz: Changed Everything,” *News from Indian Country* 8, no. 20 (November 1999).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

While the American Indian occupation is often perceived as a failed attempt to take over a 22-acre piece of government property, it has proven to be a catalyst for the growing empowerment of Native Americans through the Red Power movement. “The occupation of Alcatraz Island...initiated a unique nine-year period of Red Power protest that culminated in the transformation of national consciousness about American Indians and engendered more open and confident sense of identity among people of Indian descent.”³² Although perceptions of the movement at the time were often negative, as shown through mainstream media, insights into personal perspectives of the movement have shown the truth behind the occupation and self-determination moving forward. The Red Power movement often becomes lost in the overwhelming number of social and political movements that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, but it does not by any means signify that it was any less important than other movements. What is important to remember about the Alcatraz occupation is that it was a promoter for social and political change for an especially disparaged group of people who had been under governmental control for 200 years.

³² Duane Champagne, Troy Johnson, and Joane Nagel, *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 9.