



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Native Americans occupy Alcatraz for land rights, 1969-1971

20 November

1969

to: 11 June

1971

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *San Francisco, California*

Location Description: *Alcatraz Island*

Goals:

"To better the lives of all Indian people" by making "known to the world that we have a right to use our land for our own benefit" through reclaiming Alcatraz "in name of all American Indians by right of discovery." (Taken from "The Alcatraz Proclamation to the great White Father and his People")

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure
- 184. Defiance of blockades

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 026. Paint as protest
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Native Americans of many different tribes

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Richard Oakes (Mohawk), Richard McKenzie (Sioux), Adam Fortunate Eagle (Red Lake Chippewa), LaNada Boyer (Bannock), and Native students from California colleges

Partners:

Bay Area Chapter of the American Indian Council

External allies:

Media, private businesses, non-Native and Native citizens

Involvement of social elites:

Celebrities in the entertainment industry advocated for the occupation of Alcatraz

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bay Area Chapter of the American Indian Council
- Indians of all Nations
- Media sources

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Private businesses

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Celebrities in entertainment industry

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Media sources (exit)

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

U.S. Federal Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Supposed harassment of reporters. Armed occupants confronted the Coast Guard on one occasion, and, while no one was injured, one arrow was shot at the side of a boat. Journalists wrote on beatings that took place on the island, but the

authenticity of the accusation is unknown

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Indians never retained ownership of Alcatraz, their largest proclaimed goal. However, the reason this was a goal was to better the lives of the Native Americans, a category one could argue the campaign was successful in. Ten policy changes regarding Native Americans resulted from the occupation, and a resurgence of Native pride from the occupation mounted in the Red Power movement.

In the 1950s the Eisenhower administration enacted the Relocation and Termination programs in regard to American Indian federal policy. The first part meant that Native Americans were to relocate from their respective reservations into big cities. In doing this, Native Americans would lose the unity of the immediate communities as they individually integrated as citizens into separate cities. Meanwhile, the reservation lands would be liquidated into the hands of the federal government. The second part, termination, was a broader result of the relocation. Any treaties the United States government had previously with Native Americans would be terminated because they no longer existed as a sovereign nation.

Relocated Natives were promised vocational training, financial assistance, and decent housing, but none of these were delivered. Instead, the majority wandered through unfamiliar cities without job skills, no knowledge of the English language, living in poor housing developments. As a result of the policy, by the mid-1960s, 40,000 Indians inhabited San Francisco alone. Amidst the adversity, the San Francisco Indian population held firmly onto their culture and formed social and political organizations of their own, often across tribal lines.

At the same time as Natives were moving into big cities, other social justice campaigns were at energetic heights. Indian communities in cities began to take up their own protest of Native American treaty and civil rights abuses. By the late 1960s the Native community in San Francisco was one of the best organized in the country.

The first year of Richard Nixon's presidency looked hopeful for struggling Natives, but there was a desire to propagate change like the other movements of the time. On 28 October 1969 a fire destroyed the San Francisco Indian Center. The center had been an anchor for the relocatees, providing employment, health care, and legal services. But with no place to meet and a growing determination to get Native issues to the forefront, the center's situation was now an opportunity.

Indians associated with the Bay Area Chapter of the American Indian Council had been planning to take over Alcatraz Island, across the bay from San Francisco, since the prison there had closed and was declared surplus federal property. Only now there was energy behind the takeover. On 8 March 1964, five Souix Indians landed on Alcatraz with twenty-some supporters and media personnel and claimed the island under the Souix Treaty of 1868, which gave them the ability to seize federal surplus land. They announced their intention to pay the federal government 47 cents an acre for the island. The five also demanded the construction of a cultural center and an Indian university on the island. The occupation was marked with a victory dance, accompanied by tribal headdress, singing, and drumming. After four hours, authorities removed the occupants from Alcatraz.

The first occupation was coincidentally followed by public discussions in San Francisco on how to use Alcatraz. The favored plan was for a monument dedicated to the United Nations and world peace. Natives proposed the cultural center, but the idea was met with a suggestive statement from the government about the island being federal property.

On 9 November 1969, seventy-five Indians were ready to set sail for Alcatraz again, but the boats never showed up. As the Indians tried to keep the media entertained, Native Richard Oakes emerged as somewhat of a spokesperson. After some time, Adam Fortunate Eagle (Red Lake Chippewa) convinced a skipper to give the Indians a symbolic ride around Alcatraz. But as the boat circled the Alcatraz, Oakes and four others jumped overboard and swam to the island. They were quickly escorted back to mainland by the Coast Guard, but only after claiming Alcatraz by right of discovery. That night fourteen Natives returned to the island and hid out overnight. A boat of reporters and representatives from the General Services Administration (GSA) arrived in the morning, and the Coast Guard gave the occupants the chance to leave peacefully. Oakes presented the government officials with their proclamation, claiming land by right of discovery, and the group left Alcatraz.

This proclamation, officially entitled “The Alcatraz Proclamation to the great White Father and his People 1969,” served as the major document of the campaign. It was drafted by the Indians of All Nations, which became the group affiliation for those associated with the occupation. The heart of the proclamation was land reclamation for Native Americans, both because they had existed on the land far before the United States was formed (right of discovery) and because of violated treaties. They wanted “to make known to the world that we have a right to use our land for our own benefit.” The Indians of All Nations would compensate the federal government with “24 dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man’s purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago.” This pay would also exceed what the government was currently paying California Indians for their lands.

At 2 a.m. on 20 November 1969, seventy-nine Indians, mainly students, but also married couples, and six children, sailed to Alcatraz Island to begin a 19-month occupation of the land. The Coast Guard attempted a blockade to prevent landing, but all members made it through. After headquarters were set up on the island, they had a celebratory powwow. The Coast Guard attempted to continue the blockade so as to prevent supplies and people from reaching Alcatraz, but the island was already so isolated that the blockade was lifted.

During the day the GSA regional administration, lawyers of the Indian occupiers, and a Department of the Interior representative arrived to inform the Natives that they had 24 hours to clear Alcatraz. Oakes phoned the San Francisco Department of Interior with the demands of the proclamation: the return of Alcatraz to the Indians and sufficient funding to construct and maintain an Indian cultural center and Indian university on the island. When Oakes announced that the group would not be leaving until those demands were met, the government agreed to negotiate with the Indians. There was no action to remove the occupants. Press continued on the story and news of the occupation spread around the world. As public support of the Natives mounted, the Nixon administration feared violent slip-ups on behalf of the government and assigned the situation to Nixon’s special counsel.

The occupiers organized themselves immediately. They denounced any violence during the occupation and decided against occupation by non-Indian outsiders. They elected a council, set up a traditional school, and organized a security force called the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs to patrol the island. Alcatraz became a symbol for self-determination. Painted slogans along building fronts announced “Alcatraz is Indian Land” and a flag of a tepee beneath a broken peace pipe flew prominently. Money, food, and supplies were sent to the island from businesses and private citizens. Fortunate Eagle took responsibility overseeing the shipments.

On Thanksgiving Day hundreds of supporters arrived on the island. There exuded a “renewed pride in Indian identity.” Desire to keep contact with the outside took form of a radio station and a newsletter, and this contact paid off as telegrams flooded the capitol. The entertainment industry in particular took up support for the Natives on Alcatraz. Native Jim Thorpe’s daughter, Grace (Sac and Fox), joined the occupation for several months, and celebrities like Jane Fonda and Marlon Brando showed their support. Bands like The Grateful Dead and Creedence Clearwater Revival played concerts for the cause and made donations.

Public support applied pressure to the federal government to meet with the Natives on Alcatraz. However, the Indians of All

Tribes refused any compromise that didn't leave them with the title to Alcatraz. With no intention of surrendering the island, the government hoped living conditions would become unbearable for the occupants and there would be no need for resolution. The fact was that life on Alcatraz did become difficult. Starting on December 4, the GSA disconnected electrical power and incoming telephone lines. Debates over the intention of the occupation arose between occupants and other Natives. Also, for various reasons occupants began to leave the island. Power struggles started to intensify, and after Oakes left the island because of his daughter's death, the occupation lost its defined leader.

A negotiating team from Washington arrived on Alcatraz and discussion ensued throughout March, April, and May of 1970. Virtually no progress was made. In late May the remaining electrical power, telephone service, and water supply were cut off. A fire suspiciously destroyed isolated parts of the island on June 1, each group (the government and Natives) blaming the other. Some kind of legislation finally surfaced as the Nixon administration begrudgingly announced policy committed to "self-determination without termination for Native Americans." The occupation of Alcatraz went without mention.

A turning point in the campaign occurred when the Coast Guard arrived to attend to public wishes for re-operation of the navigation aids on the island. Armed occupants confronted the intruders, demanding restoration of the water supply before anything could happen with the navigational aids. As the Coast Guard's crew was preparing to leave, a two and a half foot long arrow struck the side of a boat, and instantly the occupants were viewed as dangerous.

The media began publishing stories of beatings and assaults on the island, and public support took a nosedive. A mid-January supertanker collision was chalked up to the Native's refusal to allow navigational aids to be fixed. Support withdrew even more and supplies became scarce on the island. On 11 June 1971 a force of federal marshals, GSA Special Forces, the Coast Guard, and FBI agents removed the final fifteen Indians from Alcatraz. The six men, four women, and five children did not resist and the 19-month and 9-day occupation was over.

The property rights of Alcatraz were never given to Native Americans. Those who had devoted over a year of their life to the occupation felt the defeat. However, the occupation was the first prolonged demonstration by Native Americans and saw at least and law shifts in regard to its community. Prominent scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. has said, "Alcatraz was a big enough symbol that for the first time this century Indians were taken seriously." Alcatraz inspired many other similar occupations in the years following and some say the demonstration ignited the Red Power movement. LaNada Boyer, an organizer of the occupation, said, "the occupation was the seed of an effort to rebuild Indian cultures and political alliances among tribes."

Research Notes

Influences:

The seizure of federal land inspired many similar invasions in California and the rest of the country. Mainly, this early instance of civil disobedience in general influenced the Red Power movement. (2)

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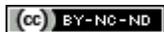
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