Native Americans walk from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. for U.S. civil rights, 1978

February 1978 to: July 1978

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: San Francisco, California to Washington, D.C.

Goals:
To prevent the passage of eleven bills before Congress that would threaten Native American land, hunting, and fishing rights.
To raise awareness about the infringement upon the rights of Native Americans and the particular issues facing and needs of the community.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 041. Pilgrimages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse

Classifications

Classification:
Defense

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- American Indian Movement (AIM)
- Black Power Movement
- College students
- Native American activists
- some government officials and elites

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Dennis Banks, one of the co-founders of the American Indian Movement (AIM); many of the coordinators of the occupation of Alcatraz Island

Partners:
American Indian Movement, Black Power Movement, Chicano Movement

External allies:
Certain government officials

Involvement of social elites:
Minimal except for some actors such as Marlon Brando and boxing star Muhammad Ali

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- American Indian Movement
- College students
- Dennis Banks

Groups in 2nd Segment:
- Black Power Movement

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
- Chicano Movement

Groups in 6th Segment:
- Donald Dellums
- Marlon Brando
- Muhammad Ali
- Ted Kennedy
Segment Length: One month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Bureau of Indian Affairs; U.S. Congress

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
Congress rejected all 11 of the proposed bills and the march raised consciousness throughout the country regards to indigenous rights; however, the awareness did not reach a level that significantly swayed the government’s treatment of Native Americans and Native rights. The campaign survived through its intended period, and while it did grow and gain support, it did not quite reach the level of involvement and overall social consciousness that could have more effectively sustained the movement after the end of the campaign.

After the occupation of Alcatraz from 1969 to 1971, and subsequent forcible removal of American Indians by the United States government, the movement for civil rights for Native Americans became increasingly determined, firm, and conflictual. The government responded to this shift with exceedingly vigorous and sometimes fatal tactics. By 1979, some researchers and scholars had deemed the period the “continuing Indian Wars”. The movement began to partner with and draw from the ideas of the rising Black Power Movement, and received friendship and support from this group of African-American activists, who shared similar concepts of empowerment and nationalism.

Amidst the violence of the decade, some Native American leaders discovered the existence of eleven bills pending in Congress which would limit rights to tribal government, hunting, and fishing, as well as restrict access to social services by closing Native schools and hospitals. They decided to organize a nonviolent demonstration to draw attention to the cause and protest the potential legislation.

Dennis Banks, one of the co-founders of the American Indian Movement, proposed the idea of a 3,000-mile march from Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, California to Washington, D.C. in response to the bills in front of Congress regarding Native rights. The bills would have essentially eliminated land and water rights in Maine and New York, as well as on reservations across the country; imposed new laws in Washington state requiring Native Americans to acquire permits for fishing and hunting; severely limited the power of tribal jurisdictions; implemented a policy of forced assimilation; and would have cut off virtually all social services including schools, hospitals, and housing projects. Banks felt that the march would be not only an
effective way to protest the infringement on American Indian rights, but also to raise awareness among non-Native Americans. His concept gained popularity among leaders and members of the Native rights community, including both American Indians and Americans from other various backgrounds.

The journey would also pay homage to the Trail of Broken Treaties of 1972, which consisted of a caravan by car and subsequent march in Washington, D.C. and occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to protest the government’s consistent negligence and hypocrisy in regards to treaties for land, water, and sovereignty rights for American Indians since the arrival of European settlers. In turn, the Trail of Broken Treaties was a memorialization of the history of forced migration that the Native American community has had to endure, including the Trail of Tears (following the Indian Removal Act of 1830) and the Long Walk of 1864, when nearly 5,000 Apache and Navajo people were faced with the choice of either starving in the wake of the systematic destruction of their crops and livestock by the American army or relocating the 400 miles to Fort Sumner. Throughout the journey and even at Fort Sumner, many died of starvation and disease, or were shot or picked up by slave traders for falling behind the others. Therefore, symbolism played a significant role in the Longest Walk, both in the sense of reincarnating Native Americans’ most traumatic persecutions and representing the unity and solidarity of many Indian tribes, despite the fact they were often targeted separately or purposefully pitted against each other by the U.S. government.

On February 11, 1978, 2,000 marchers, of whom approximately half were Native Americans and half non-Native Americans, left San Francisco on foot, bound for the nation’s capital: Washington, D.C. In addition to the goal of preventing the passage of the eleven bills, the organizers of the campaign sought to educate Americans along the route about Indian culture and persecution through “teach-ins” in various cities and towns, and to foster solidarity among the many Indian nations (of which over 100 participated). While preventing the devastating consequences of the potential legislation was important, in order to change the treatment of American Indians in the United States, it was necessary to spread knowledge about Native culture, beliefs, and practices, as well as the laws and implicit policies limiting their sovereignty and well-being.

Because the form of protest was physically grueling and therefore not possible for the elderly, the very young, and many others, most of the marchers traveled the majority of the distance by bus, car, or plane. Twenty-six demonstrators completed the entire distance, walking nearly 3,000 miles, and traveling and camping in harsh conditions. They had to spend winter months in the mountains and march in high temperatures with limited funds for food and water. Paul Owns the Sabre, one of the twenty-six who walked the entire distance, said of the experience: “We faced horrible conditions...It really became a spiritual thing”. Like many activists before them, the Longest Walkers sacrificed safety and comfort to further their cause and achieve their ultimate objectives.

Five months later, on July 15, 1978, the 2,000 marchers entered the capital city. They stopped first at Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park for a rally, at which speakers included AIM leader Clyde Bellecourt, Chicano leader Reies Lopez Tijerina, actor Marlon Brando, and U.S. Representative Donald Dellums. The marchers then made their way to the Washington Monument. Muhammad Ali, Senator Edward Kennedy, and comedian Dick Gregory also attended various rallies to demonstrate their support for the campaign.

For the following 12 days of demonstrations and rallies, most camped out at a federal park in Maryland; a few leaders of the campaign symbolically slept in a tent in front of the Washington Monument.

Over the course of the next two weeks, the participants held a series of marches and protests, including a demonstration in front of the Supreme Court to support political prisoners and bring attention to what they termed a “judicial genocide” being perpetrated against them. On July 25, they held a mass rally at the Washington Monument to protest the bills before Congress and present a Native American Manifesto challenging the current structures and definitions shaping the treatment of Native Americans and outlining their rights and needs. Two days later, California Representative Donald Dellums read the statement into the Congressional Record in its entirety.

By the end of July, all of the demonstrators had returned to their homes and, ultimately, Congress did not pass any of the eleven bills into law.
Research Notes

Influences:

The African-American civil rights, Black Power, and Chicano Movements influenced the American Indian Movement and, in turn, the Longest Walk. (1)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Carly Rosenfield, 04/12/2011

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