

The Alcatraz Occupation: Does a protest's success affect its "Americanism"?

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 sought to restore tribal self-determination, but by the 1950s Congress began limiting it again. Between 1950 and 1970, over 100 tribes lost reservation land as well American Indians living on reservations sharply decline (87% to 45%) Inspired by the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, American Indians formed various organizations, some more militant than others. Protest efforts started with the year and a half occupation of Alcatraz Island, and then ranged from a march to Washington, a 10-week occupation of the town of Wounded Knee, week long occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs

For each set, highlight the one line that MOST shares his/hers/their belief on what is American in that moment in time. Then score your belief from -10 to 10.

IOAT's Letter to American Indians (December 16, 1969)

This is a call for a delegation from each Indian nation, tribe or band from throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico to meet together on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, on December 23, 1969, for a meeting to be tentatively called the Confederation of American Indian Nations (CAIN). On November 20, 1969, 78 Indian people, under the name "Indians of all Tribes," moved on to Alcatraz Island, a former Federal Prison. We began cleaning up the Island and are still in the process of organizing, setting up classes and trying to instill the old Indian ways into our young. We moved onto Alcatraz Island because we feel that Indian people need a Cultural Center of their own. For several decades, Indian people have not had enough control of training their young people. And without a cultural center of their own, we are afraid that the old Indian ways may be lost. We believe that the only way to keep them alive is for Indian people to do it themselves.

While it was a small group which moved onto the island, we want all Indian people to join with us. More Indian people from throughout the country are coming to the island every day. We are issuing this call in an attempt to unify all our Indian Brothers behind a common cause. We realize that there are more problems in Indian communities besides having our culture taken away. We have water problems, land problems, "social" problems, job opportunity problems, and many others. And as Vice President Agnew said at the annual convention of the National Congress of American Indians in October of this year, now is the time for Indian leadership.

We realize too that we are not getting anywhere fast by working alone as individual tribes. If we can gather together as brothers and come to a common agreement, we feel that we can be much more effective, doing things for ourselves, instead of having someone else doing it, telling us what is good for us. So we must start somewhere. We feel that if we are going to succeed, we must hold on to the old ways. This is the first and most important reason we went to Alcatraz Island.

We feel that the only reason Indian people have been able to hold on and survive through decades of persecution and cultural deprivation is that the Indian way of life is and has been strong enough to hold the people together. We hope to reinforce the traditional Indian way of life by building a Cultural Center on Alcatraz Island. We hope to build a college, a religious and spiritual center, a museum, a center of ecology, and a training school. We hope to have the Cultural Center controlled by Indians, with the delegates from each Indian nation and urban center present for the first meeting on December 23, and at future meetings of the governing body.

We are inviting all our brothers to join with us on December 23, if not in person, then in spirit. We are also raising funds for Alcatraz. The "Alcatraz Relief Fund" is established with the Bank of California, Mission Branch, 3060 16th Street, San Francisco, California 94103, and we are asking that donations of money go to the bank directly. We are also asking for formal resolutions of support from each organized Indian tribe and urban center. We can have great power at the bargaining table if we can get the support and help of all Indian people.

THE ALCATRAZ PROCLAMATION to the Great White Father and his People (1969)

We, the native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for \$24 in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that \$24 in trade goods for these 16 acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of \$1.24 per acres is greater than the \$0.47 per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their lands... We will

<p>further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them 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. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men.</p> <p>We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. By this, we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that:</p> <p>1. It is isolated from modern facilities 2. It has no fresh running water. 3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities. 4. There are no oil or mineral rights. 5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great. 6. There are no health-care facilities. 7. The soil is rocky and non-productive, and the land does not support game. 8. There are no educational facilities. 9. The population has always exceeded the land base. 10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.</p> <p>Since the San Francisco Indian Center burned down, there is no place for Indians to assemble and carry on tribal life here in the white man's city. Therefore, we plan to develop on this island several Indian institutions: 1. A Center for Native American Studies... 2. An American Indian Spiritual Center... 3. An Indian Center of Ecology... 4. A Great Indian Training School... Some of the present buildings will be taken over to develop an American Indian Museum which will depict our native food and other cultural contributions we have given to the world. Another part of the museum will present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation...</p> <p>We hold the rock!</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">President Nixon's Special Message on Indian Affairs (1970)</p> <p>It is long past time that the Indian policies of the Federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities and insights of the Indian people. .. The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions. This, then, must be the goal of any new national policy toward the Indian people to strengthen the Indian's sense of autonomy without threatening this sense of community. ... And we must make it clear that Indians can become independent of Federal control without being cut off from Federal concern and Federal support.</p> <p>The recommendations of this administration represent an historic step forward in Indian policy. We are proposing to break sharply with past approaches to Indian problems. In place of a long series of piece meal reforms, we suggest a new and coherent strategy. ... we suggest a policy in which the Federal government and the Indian community play complementary roles. ...</p> <p>The Indians of America need Federal assistance – this much has long been clear. What has not always been clear, however, is that the Federal government needs Indian energies and Indian leadership if its assistance is to be effective in improving the conditions of Indian life. It is a new and balanced relationship between the United States government and the first Americans that is at the heart of our approach to Indian problems. And that is why we now approach these problems with new confidence that they will successfully be overcome.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Carl Nolte's <i>SF Gate</i> news article "Occupation of Alcatraz helped Indians make gains" (2010)</p> <p>The Indian occupation of Alcatraz - one of the most unusual events in San Francisco history - ended on a June afternoon just 40 years ago today when U.S. marshals swooped down on the prison island, hauled off 15 somewhat bedraggled Indians and told them never to return. It appeared to be an enormous defeat for American Indian activists who had seized Alcatraz and occupied it for 19 months, hoping to turn it into an Indian university or cultural center. None of that happened.</p> <p>"At the time it ended, the occupation seemed to be a failure," said Craig Glasner, a park ranger stationed on Alcatraz. But now, even the government admits the occupation was a landmark event. For one thing, the government had to recognize a new Indian militancy. For another, plans to sell the island to private developers were dropped and Alcatraz is now part of a national park and draws 1.4 million visitors a year.</p> <p>"The occupation of Alcatraz exceeded our wildest dreams," said Adam Fortunate Eagle Nordwall, one of the original leaders of the occupation. "It caused major changes in government policies toward Indians. So we won."</p>	

Federal raid It certainly did not appear that way on June 11, 1971, when a raiding party of 20 armed federal marshals stepped off three Coast Guard cutters and evicted six men, four women and five children - the last remnants of hundreds of Indians and their supporters who had held the island for close to two years.

The government called them "illegal inhabitants." Though none of them was arrested, marshals removed them from Alcatraz, put up chain-link fences and stationed federal officers on the island. "We only want to get on with the business of developing the island," said U.S. Attorney James Browning.

Alcatraz had been abandoned as a prison in 1963 and declared surplus by the government. At one time it was offered for sale for \$2 million. A more serious proposal was floated later - the island would be sold to a developer and turned into high-end residences and a grand casino, a sort of Monte Carlo in the bay.

Claiming the island All that talk ended in November 1969, when Richard Oakes, a member of the Mohawk tribe who lived in San Francisco, led a group of 14 Indians to the island in a chartered boat to claim it for a group they called Indians of All Tribes. They only stayed overnight, but three weeks later, a group of 80 Indians came back. "This time we have come to stay," Oakes said.

They claimed the island "by right of discovery" and issued a proclamation offering to pay \$24 for it - the price Dutch colonists paid for Manhattan. The Indians painted signs all over the island - "You are on Indian land" and "Red Power."

Dead serious At first it all seemed to be a lark. The news media loved it - colorful Indians camping on America's most famous island prison - but the Indians were dead serious. The government at first backed off, and then began formal, and sometimes secret, talks with the Indians. The Indians wanted a cultural center, perhaps an Indian university.

"We need this place," said Tom Joseph, a Shoshone-Paiute, who was a student at UCLA. "Alcatraz," said Nordwall, "has become a symbol." It was also a bargaining chip. As long as the Indians mounted a nonviolent, high-profile occupation, the government had to talk. Apparently, even Leonard Garment, a powerful adviser to President Richard Nixon, was involved.

At one point, Nordwall and several others say, the government offered to trade Fort Mason on the San Francisco waterfront for the island. "I took the swap offer to Oakes," Nordwall said this week, "but he turned it down colder than hell."

Events take a turn But events took a turn for the worse in January 1970, when Oakes' 12-year-old stepdaughter, Yvonne, died after a fall on the island. It broke Oakes' heart and he left the island. Soon afterward, the Indian leadership fractured as different groups fought for control. Years later, Nordwall, now 81, said he was not surprised that the movement fractured. "That goes with any revolution," he said. "When you have an uprising, you have different factions duking it out. Just look at the Middle East now."

In May of 1970, the government removed a water barge that pumped fresh water into a tank on the island. Then they cut off the electricity. On June 1 a fire broke out and destroyed several structures, including the warden's residence. The government and the Indians blamed each other.

By summer, there were only 60 to 75 Indians still on Alcatraz, down from 800 at the height of the occupation. "We're Indians, all of us, and we belong on Alcatraz," La Nada Means, a 23-year-old Shoshone Bannock, told Herb Caen when the famed columnist visited the island. "Indians never had prisons - yet here, in this white man's prison, we have found freedom for the first time." But the government played a waiting game. The long winter of 1970-71 took its toll. There was trouble on the island, vandalism, fights. The public gradually turned against the Indians.

Attitudes change But when it was over, views shifted. The government attitude toward Indians changed; other, more militant Indians occupied other sites. In 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. The old plans to terminate Indian reservations and tear up treaties were scrapped. "We got recognition," said Eloy Martinez, who was one of the original occupiers. Martinez goes out every year on Columbus Day - he calls it Indigenous Day - and on Thanksgiving for a fire ceremony. "The occupation? I think it was pretty successful," he said.

Various US legal actions since Nixon's Special Message (1972-1966)

What generally did each legal action do? What general goal did the legal action address?

1972 Indian Education Act

1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act

1977 Senate Committee of Indian Affairs

1978 Indian Child Welfare Act

1978 Indian Religious Freedom Act

1980 United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians

1982 Indian Mineral Development Act

1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act

1990 Native Americans Language Acts

1990 Indian Arts and Craft Act

1990 Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act

1990 Indian Law Enforcement Act

1996 National American Indian Heritage Month declaration (November)

The MOST "American" goal the protestors declared was...

because...

The legal action that MOST directly addresses a goal of the protestors is...

because.....

These protestors were/weren't different from the sit-inners in that....

The protest ended with the feeling that...

Within years, the protest changed/didn't change its perceived success because...

Photo #1 Original and modern day view island entrance, markings left to tell of Alcatraz's history



American Indians reworked Alcatraz' main entrance signage after the 1969 invasion. Photo By Michelle Vignes



Photo #2 Markings made during the Alcatraz Occupation and still present throughout island



Much of the Alcatraz graffiti turned the tables on history with phrases carrying bitter irony. Photo by Michelle Vignes.



LaNada Boyer inside one of the Alcatraz guard barracks where occupiers lived from 1969-71.
Much of the graffiti from 30 years ago remains throughout the island today.
Photo by Linda Sue Scott.

Photo #3 Federal government official arrives and is welcomed by protestors



Occupation organizer Richard Oakes (Mohawk) meets with U.S. Attorney Cecil Poole in December 1969 on Alcatraz Island. Poole had arrived to urge American Indians to leave the island, but the occupation continued for another 16 months. Island caretaker John Hart and Dennis Turner, a tribal leader, look on. Photo by Ilka Hartmann

Photo #4 Protestors interacting with the island guard on the first night



The first Indians that occupied Alcatraz on the first night in NOV 20, 1969, talking with a guard in the guard shack on the main dock. L to R, Glen Dodson, Caretaker; Joe Bill; Al Miller; unknown. Photo: Vince Maggiora, The Chronicle



Richard Oakes unloading food that came over from SF by boat on November 20, 1969. Richard's daughter, Yvonne, flashing the Victory sign, waits in the truck on the main dock on Alcatraz island. Yvonne later fell to her death, causing her family to leave the occupation. Photo: Vince Maggiora, The Chronicle