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Red power: why did America's natives go back on the warpath in the 1960s?

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America in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed several ethnic protest movements linked to the demand for civil rights. Martin Luther King and the black Civil Rights movement are the best-known examples of this ethnic activism. Another example is the Chicano Civil Rights movement associated with Cesar Chavez and Mexican American activism (see 20TH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW, Vol. 4, No. 1). Less well known, however, is the Native American activism of the so-called Red Power movement, which is the subject of this article.

Of all the ethnic groups that are part of US history, none has suffered more than the original inhabitants of what became the USA--the Native Americans, or Red Indians as they were first known. There were over 500 tribes or bands in North America before the onset of European settlement in the sixteenth century and all of these were affected, sooner or later, by the relentless westward movement of white settlers across the continent.

After the American Revolution (1775-83), the US government decided to remove some of the Eastern tribes to the western side of the Mississippi. This led to the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, when members of the Five Civilised Tribes were forced to travel hundreds of miles to the 'Indian territory', now part of the state of Oklahoma. Many men, women and children died in the process. But the westward movement of white settlement continued unabated and by the time of the Civil War (1861-65), the tribes of the Great Plains in the Mid-West had themselves come into regular contact with settlers and the US army.

Wounded Knee, 1890

This led to the best-known period in Western history, when tribes such as the Sioux, the Cheyenne and, further south, the Apache and the Navajo, resisted the white advance. In the most famous of all the encounters between the Native Americans and the US government, the Indians led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull defeated part of the US army at the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876, an engagement forever associated with General George Custer and 'Custer's last stand'.

But this triumph, if such it can be called, was short-lived and by 1890, the Indian tribes had been crushed. The end of Native American resistance is usually dated to the battle (or massacre) of Wounded Knee, in South Dakota, in 1890, when the Sioux band of Chief Big Foot was slaughtered by Custer's old regiment, the Seventh US Cavalry. Hence the title of one of the best-known books on Native American history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown.

Increasingly after 1890, US policy became one of enforced assimilation. Native American reservations, which had been under the control of tribal governments, were divided into allotments, to be held individually by Native American families. Surplus lands were sold off and Indians were expected to become farmers or tradesmen or to move to the cities to find other work. Children often had to attend white-run boarding schools where Indian religion, customs and language were banned and US values were taught. Indians were given US citizenship in 1924 but, as an ethnic group, they were the poorest and most helpless in the USA, as was made clear in the Meriam Report of 1928. Above all, their numbers had declined to 250,000 out of a total US population of over 100 million.

National Congress of American Indians

From this low point there was some improvement during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, which saw the introduction of the so-called 'Indian New Deal' of the 1930s. The Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934 associated with John Collier, the Head of the Bureau for Indian Affairs, ended the allotment system and encouraged tribal government and the survival of Native American culture. But Collier's reforms were not welcomed by all Indian tribes and were seen by some as an example of white reformers imposing their ideas on the Native population.

Partly as a result of this dissatisfaction, a new organisation was founded in November 1944 to represent all of the Native American

tribes, including the Inuits (formerly known as Eskimos) of Alaska. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) established its headquarters in Washington DC and aimed to act as a pressure group on US government policy. It had some success but in 1953, during the Eisenhower administration, Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108, which led to the onset of 'termination'--the policy of terminating federal responsibility for Native American affairs and transferring them to the state governments, many of whom were even less sympathetic towards Indian grievances than the federal government in Washington.

'We, the Indian People', 1961

This was the situation that led to the increase in Indian activism in the 1960s, an early indication of which was the 'Declaration of Indian Purpose' drawn up by the American Indian Conference held at the University of Chicago in June 1961. Consciously echoing the words of the American Declaration of Independence 185 years earlier, the Native American Declaration stated:

In order to give due recognition to certain basic philosophies by which the Indian people and all other people endeavour to live, We, the Indian people must be governed by high principles and laws in a democratic manner, with a right to choose our own way of life.

The conference consisted of 420 Indians from 67 tribes. It called for reforms that would improve Native American education, housing, welfare and economic development but its main theme was the need for 'self determination'--the right of Native Americans to participate fully in decisions made about them.

The National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) in Gallup, New Mexico, was also founded in 1961. Its aim was to secure equal opportunities for Native Americans and it paralleled similar youth organisations in the wider civil rights movement. Its president, Melvin Thorn, spoke at the American Indian Conference on Poverty, Washington DC, in May 1964 and pointed out that young people had most at stake in the future development of Native Americans. He called for an end to government efforts to force Indians to assimilate into white culture and said that 'the responsibility to make decisions for ourselves must be placed in Indian hands'.

The Conference on Poverty helped to persuade the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson that Indians should be included in the coverage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, part of Johnson's 'Great Society' programme. However, the Indian Resources Development Bill of 1967 was felt by many Native American activists to be yet another example of government legislation that ignored the Indian viewpoint. In particular, the bill did not overturn House Resolution 108. As a result, a conference of Indian leaders summoned to Washington to approve the bill refused to do so and it was dropped.

On 6 March 1968, President Johnson sent a message to Congress calling for a new goal for Indians that would end the old debate about termination of Indian programmes and instead stress self-determination. On the same day he signed an executive order creating the National Council on Indian Opportunity, chaired by the vice-president and consisting of Indian members and government officials. Also in 1968, the Civil Rights Act concerned primarily with a fair housing policy for minority groups also extended the freedoms included in the bill of rights to Indians living on reservations.

American Indian Movement

However, for some Native American activists these reforms were too little, too late. They had grown impatient with the slow pace of change and had decided to form a new and more radical organisation called the American Indian Movement (AIM). AIM was founded in Minneapolis in July 1968 and was led by urban Indians such as Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt and Russell Means. They believed that traditional Indian activism, working within the political system, had failed and that direct action was necessary to publicise the Indian cause. Thus they engaged in a series of confrontational campaigns that drew attention to what became known as Red Power.

An early sign of this new militancy came with the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, in November 1969. This was carried out by a group of Native Americans calling themselves 'Indians of all tribes'. Their spokesman was John Trudell, who became chairman of AIM for most of the 1970s. Alcatraz had housed a federal prison, but this was no longer in use and the island was virtually deserted when it was taken over, with the aim of building a cultural centre dedicated to the Indian way of life. Many other Native Americans came to the island and the occupation continued until June 1971.

AIM was involved in a series of high profile events in the early 1970s. These included the seizure of a replica of the Mayflower in November 1970 during a Thanksgiving ceremony commemorating the three-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620. This was followed by the occupation of Mount Rushmore in July 1971 and the so-called Trail of Broken Treaties caravan that ended with the occupation of the headquarters of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington DC in November 1972.

The most controversial event involving AIM occurred in February 1973 in the village of Wounded Knee--where the 1890 massacre had taken place--on the Pine Ridge reservation of South Dakota. Over 200 AIM supporters occupied Wounded Knee and held it for 71 days against the FBI and local police. Two members of AIM were killed and a US marshal was wounded. This led to growing hostility between AIM members and the FBI, which culminated in the so-called Incident at Oglala--a gun battle on 26 June 1975, in which two FBI agents were killed. Leonard Peltier, an AIM activist, was found guilty of their murders and was sentenced to life imprisonment, despite claims that he was innocent.

The Longest March

On 28 February 1978 Dennis Banks and a number of other AIM activists organised the Longest March from Alcatraz Island to Washington DC. The purpose of the march was to protest against what they regarded as government indifference to Native American rights and beliefs, including the practising of their religion. President Carter met the leaders of the march when they arrived in Washington and in August 1978 signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), which was meant to ensure that Native Americans could enjoy freedom of religion. But it did not end disputes over access to sacred Indian sites such as the Black Hills in South Dakota.

Native American activism has continued unabated since the 1970s but without the same degree of drama as in those years. Organisations such as the NCAI, the NYIC and AIM still campaign energetically on issues such as disputed land ownership and fishing rights and the use of Indian mascots for sports teams. There is also a greater appreciation of Native American history and culture in the USA, symbolised by the magnificent new National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC, opened in 2004. Some Native Americans are also much more prosperous than they have ever been, thanks partly to the establishment of casinos on a number of reservations.

However, the Native Americans remain a relatively small pressure group in US society. Their population has increased to 3 million, but this still amounts to only 1% of the total population of the USA. There is currently only one Native American member of Congress (from Oklahoma), compared with 43 black Americans and 26 Hispanics. In short, Native Americans still have a long way to go before they can hope to match the economic and political power of either of these ethnic groups in contemporary US society. In 2008, AIM organised a second Longest March, partly to protest about the continued imprisonment of Peltier. After 40 years in existence, some of AIM's objectives have been realised but many remained unfulfilled.

Key concept

Causation

Before you read this

You may not know much about the Civil Rights movement among the Native Americans, so for comparison look at the black Civil Rights movement. Why did it turn militant and how much did its militancy achieve? Then compare it with the situation described here.

Crazy Horse (1840-77): renowned warrior and member of the Oglala Sioux tribe. A leader of the Indian forces that defeated Custer at the Little Big Horn in 1876 but was killed while in US custody the following year.

Sitting Bull (1831-90): Sioux holy man and a leader of the Native American forces at the battle of the Little Big Horn. Killed in 1890 during a confrontation with government police.

George Custer (1839-76): made his name during the Civil War of 1861-65 as a brave and daring officer. He and his contingent of Seventh Cavalry were wiped out at the battle of the Little Big Horn in June 1876: 'Custer's last stand'.

Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration, published in 1928, was a survey of conditions on Indian Reservations in 26 states, instigated in 1926 by Senator Hubert Work, secretary for the interior, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation and supervised by Lewis Meriam of the Institute for Government Research (Brookings Institution).

Great Society programme: aimed at prosperity, social improvement and civil rights reform, thus providing abundance and liberty for all, an end to poverty and racial injustice.

Trail of Broken Treaties caravan: in the summer of 1972, activist leaders met to plan a First Nations caravan from the west coast to Washington DC. They arrived in Washington just before the presidential election and ended up by occupying the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Questions

- * Why did white Americans feel the need to force Native Americans to assimilate?
- * In the light of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, was there any need for AIM?
- * To what extent is the relative failure of the American Indian movement the result of concentrating too heavily on symbols and issues from the past?

Key points

- * The westward movement of settlement across the USA inevitably clashed with the Indian way of life and led to events such as the Trail of Tears in the 1830s. The battle (or massacre) of Wounded Knee in 1890 marked the end of Native American military resistance. Thereafter the official US government policy was one of enforced assimilation.
- * Native American Indians were eventually given US citizenship in 1924 but, like other minority ethnic groups, they did not enjoy full civil rights or equal economic opportunities. Native Americans were at the bottom of US society in terms of poverty, unemployment and life expectancy.
- * House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953 introduced a policy of 'termination'--the ending of the relationship between the federal government and the tribes. This worsened the position of the Native Americans.
- * There was some improvement in their fortunes in the 1960s, especially with the introduction of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. However, there was growing frustration with policies being determined in Washington DC without proper consultation with the Native Americans themselves.
- * In 1968, this frustration led to the founding of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which adopted more radical tactics to draw attention to the plight of the Native Americans. Events such as the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and of Wounded Knee in

1973 were examples of the greater militancy associated with the Red Power movement.

* There has been some improvement in the economic position of the Native Americans since the 1970s, chiefly associated with the income from casinos on the reservations. But the Native Americans are still one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in US society today.

Recent Native American activists

Dennis Banks (b. 1932)

Author, teacher and leader. A member of the Ojibwe people, born on Leech Lake reservation in Minnesota. Founder member of the American Indian Movement in 1968. Took part in the occupation of Alcatraz 1969-71. Organiser of the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties and the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington DC. Leader of the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee, 1973. Helped to organise the Longest Walks from Alcatraz to Washington DC in 1978 and 2008.

Clyde Bellecourt (b. 1936)

Leading civil rights activist. An Ojibwe born on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota. As a young man, he was involved in petty crime and sent to prison for robbery in 1962. Helped to organise AIM in 1968. Took part in the Trail of Broken Treaties and the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972 and of Wounded Knee in 1973. Still active in opposing the use of Indian mascots in sport and advertising.

Vine Deloria Jr (1933-2005)

Author, historian and theologian. Born in South Dakota near the Oglala Sioux reservation at Pine Ridge, scene of the Wounded Knee occupation in 1973. The son and grandson of Episcopalian ministers, he was influenced by Christianity as well as Indian religious beliefs. Executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, 1964-67. In *Custer Died For Your Sins* he wrote that, 'Custer was the Adolf Eichmann of the Plains'. He is usually credited with having coined the term 'Red Power' in the 1960s.

Russell Means (b. 1939)

Author, actor and activist. An Oglala Sioux born on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. One of the founders of AIM in 1968, he took part in the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. Involved in the occupation of Mount Rushmore in 1971 and of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972. A leader of the Wounded Knee campaign in 1973 and joined the Longest Walk in 1978. He has appeared in a number of films, including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).

Leonard Peltier (b. 1942)

Activist and member of AIM. Spent his early years on the Turtle Mountain reservation in North Dakota. Involved in the events at Wounded Knee between 1973 and 1975, in prison since 1977 for the murder of the two FBI agents killed in the Incident at Oglala. A documentary arguing for Peltier's innocence was made in 1991. He is regarded as a prisoner of conscience by AIM activists, who are still campaigning for his release.

John Trudell (b. 1946)

Author, musician and actor. Son of a Santee Sioux father and a Mexican mother, born on the Santee reservation near Omaha, Nebraska. Involved in the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and a leading AIM activist in the 1970s. His pregnant wife and three young children were killed in a suspected arson attack in 1979. He took part in the 1992 film *Thunderheart*, based on the occupation of Wounded Knee. A documentary called *Trudell* was made about his life in 2005.

Weblink

Native Americans are well served on the web. An excellent website linked to a PBS documentary about the Alcatraz occupation, with pictures, reading and links, is available at: www.pbs.org/itvs/alcatrazisnotanisland/nativeland.html.

AIM has a good website at: www.aimovement.org/. Click on the 'Archives' section; it even has Leonard Peltier's e-mail address, so you can get in touch.

The best resource for Native Americans is the Smithsonian Institute, which has an excellent site at: www.nmai.si.edu/index.cfm. You should also explore the index of Native American material on the web at: www.hanksville.org/NAresources/. There is good footage of the Wounded Knee occupation on www.youtube.com.

For balance, see the authorities' point of view at: www.usmarshals.gov/history/wounded-knee/index.html.

Further reading

Brown, D. (2001) *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, Holt Publishing. First published in 1970, this book gave a Native American perspective on the history of the American West between 1860 and 1890 and is now the best-selling work on the subject.

Deloria, V. (1988) *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, University of Oklahoma Press. Again originally published in 1970,

this book was a product of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and was critical of white society for exploiting Native American culture.

Josephy, A. Jr (1999) *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight For Freedom*, University of Nebraska Press. An excellent book on Native American activism in the 1960s and 1970s, including some useful documents.

Matthiesson, R (1991) *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, Harper Collins. A classic work on the American Indian Movement in the 1970s.

Means, R. (1995) *Where White Men Fear To Tread*, St Martin's Griffin. The autobiography of Russell Means, a founder member of AIM and a leading Native American activist of the 1960s and 1970s.

Nagel, J. (1996) *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*, Oxford University Press. An interesting work examining the origins and nature of the Red Power movement.

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Chronology 1890 Battle (or massacre) of Wounded Knee in South Dakota. 1924 Indian Citizenship Act. 1934 Indian Reorganisation Act. 1944 Founding of National Congress of American Indians. 1953 House Concurrent Resolution 108 leads to policy of 'termination'. 1961 Declaration of Indian Purpose. Founding of National Indian Youth Council. 1968 Founding of American Indian Movement (AIM). 1969-71 Occupation of Alcatraz Island. 1973 Occupation of Wounded Knee. 1975 Incident at Oglala; deaths of two FBI agents. 1978 First Longest March (from Alcatraz to Washington DC). American Indian Religious Freedom Act. 2008 Second Longest March.

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