

"They made many promises, but kept only one. They promised to take our
land, and they took it."
-Indian occupant

The Indian Occupation of Alcatraz: Native Americans Take A Stand

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Relations between the United states and Native Americans have historically been strained. From the arrival of the English at Plymouth Rock, whites have placed themselves in positions of superiority over the native people. After many years of unrest, Native Americans organized a movement that protected the rights of the Indian people in the early 1950s. In 1969, Indians publicly voiced their bitterness toward the U.s. government with the Occupation of Alcatraz. The united States government's failure to acknowledge Native American claim of Alcatraz heightened the hostility between both groups.

Indians utilized Alcatraz Island for their own purposes for years until the U.s. Army took over control. Originally Indians believed the chunk of land in the middle of the San Francisco Bay fostered evil spirits; nevertheless, they centered their cultural practices on this remote location.¹ The Native Americans used the island as a place of isolation for tribal members who broke a tribal law, and also as a hideout for Indians attempting to escape the California Mission system.² After being granted ownership of the property, they planned to establish a Native American Cultural Center and University on the island,³ however the U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers transformed the island into one of the country's most heavily defended military forts in 1853.⁴

Because of contradictory agreements from the government and mistreatment by many American people, Indians fostered feelings of oppression and disrespect, and decided something must be done. The Proclamation of 1879, established by the United States, stated Indians could not be moved from their lands without proper permission from the Indian Department.⁵ This initially upset the Native American people. The government had also expressed their desire to maintain peace with Indians, as stated in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, but the Native Americans experienced the opposite.⁶

Working in favor of Indians' cause, civil rights issues heavily dominated national headlines to make themselves heard by the government. This meant that the opportunity to get Indian issues covered by the media presented itself to Indians. Indians' hushed feelings of animosity could be presented to the American public in order to make the people of America aware of their wrongful treatment of the Indian people.

Society's rejection of Indians in their communities also frustrated the Indians, so they planned to uphold their pride and fight for their rights. While Indians vigorously worked on their plan of action, the proposals of privately funded organizations regarding the use of the island distracted the U.S. government.⁷ As a result of the preoccupation of the government, the Indians used this opportunity to make their claim heard.

As a means of getting the attention of the U.S. government, Native Americans took action and occupied Alcatraz Island on November 24, 1969.⁸ The occupation began with a small group of fourteen Indian college students symbolically claiming the island for the Indian people, and expanded into a movement with more than one hundred and

fifty participants stationed on the island.⁹ Under the lead of Indian Chief Richard Cakes, occupants divided up the necessary responsibilities required to maintain proper living conditions on the island. Some tribal members were asked to prepare good meals, provide healthcare for the children, or to protect other occupants.¹⁰ For nineteen months, Indians remained firmly stationed on the island and had no intention of leaving until the government granted them the land.¹¹

In surrounding Bay Area communities, supporters of the Indian claim provided necessary assistance to continue the occupation. When the government cut off the island's electrical services and removed the water barge, supporters supplied portable electric generators and fresh water to sustain the Native American people.¹² They also made signs, banners and marched in parades to show their support.¹³ The occupants soon felt a sense of encouragement. The large amount of sympathy and support the occupiers received from people all over the area prevented armed confrontation from the federal government.¹⁴ The crucial support of the Indian cause demonstrated conflicting views between societal attitudes and those of the United States government.

While people on the outside saw the Indian people as a confident and powerful group, Indians struggled amongst themselves. The occupants, young and old, experienced severe hardships such as lack of water, heat and electricity. They spent their days and nights in fear that the armed forces of the government would arrive at any moment and forcibly remove them. Occupants feared each ship that passed the island because they expected it to hold government troops sent to

imprison them.¹⁵ As the occupation wore on, Native Americans began to experience boredom and pointless vandalism began: they harassed reporters, they defaced island landmarks, and they openly violated the proclaimed ban on drugs and alcohol.¹⁶ After a few months, Indian college-occupants returned to their schools and urban Indians brought up in heavy hippie and drug societies replaced them.¹⁷ The respect Indians had for their leader, Richard Oakes, declined because they believed he received too much public attention, and that he received the credit for their struggles and perseverance.¹⁸ Under the surface, disunity and animosity stirred among the occupants, and their cause weakened.

While Native Americans attempted to figure out a way to remain on the island, the U.S. government tried to find a way to remove them. The federal government insisted that the Indians leave the island and they placed an ineffective barricade around the Island.¹⁹ Receiving nothing but objections from Indians, executives of the General Services Administrations attempted to negotiate with them, yet they experienced even more difficulty in identifying a central figure with whom they could negotiate. The Indian Council informed the executives that no such person existed because they practiced "pure democracy."²⁰ The occupation then became a public relations nightmare for government officials and policy makers. The U.S. Marshall recommended immediate, forced removal out of interest in the protection of federal property, and the U.S. Coast Guard became concerned with the safety of navigation and shipping because of the presence of Bay Area Navigational Aids on Alcatraz.²¹ The main concern of the government

remained the same: to end the occupation as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Once the occupants had the government's attention, they expressed their reasons for hostility. President Nixon immediately responded to their arguments and changed many government policies in favor of the Indians. He returned many lands that the government took from various Indian tribes over the years, and issued new policies and legislation aimed to protect the rights of Indians in America. On July 8, 1970, the President delivered an address to congress stating that the rights of Indians should be valued and respected.²² His goal remained to strengthen Indians' sense of autonomy without threatening his sense of community.²³ The administration also introduced twenty-two legislative proposals on behalf of Indians to support tribal self-rule, foster cultural survival as a distinct people, and to encourage and support economic development on reservations. ²⁴

In 1970, The Indian Self-Determination Act passed. This declared the prolonged federal domination of Indian service programs served to retard rather than enhance the progress of Indian people and their communities. By depriving Indians the opportunity to develop leadership skills crucial to the realization of self-government and denying the Indian people an effective voice in the planning and implementation of programs' true needs of Indian communities, the Act was devastating to the Indian people.²⁵ Throughout Nixon's presidency, he strived to create equal opportunities for every American, and by passing legislations that secured the rights of the Indian people, he made sure Indians remained a part of this movement towards equality.²⁶ Through Nixon's actions on behalf of Indians, a land claim of long standing became validated, the principle of access to religious sites

was recognized, and termination of the Indian people had been dealt a hard blow. 27

Despite overwhelming support for occupiers and what Nixon himself felt, necessary congressional action took place in order to transfer excess federal property over to private ownership.²⁸ On June 11, 1971, the last occupant departed from the island, and the occupation ended.²⁹ Following their dismissal, Native Americans lost what little support they had for the federal government. Their protest terminated quite abruptly; however, it remained the longest continuous occupation of a federal facility by any minority group in the history of the nation. 3D Because they did not want the incident with Native Americans to re-occur and to prevent other attempted occupations, the government destroyed various buildings on the island by setting fire to them.³¹ To the disappointment of discouraged Indians, Alcatraz remained unused and out of the public eye for months, and eventually became a part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1972.³²

Though it brought Indians short-term failure, the occupation proved successful for the Indian people in the long run. Indians lost the battle for official ownership of the Island, yet the controversial event put a spotlight on a dysfunctional federal program that did nothing but keep Indians dependent.³³ The underlying goal for Indians remained to make the American public aware of the plight of the Indian people, and to the suffering caused by the federal government's broken treaties and broken promises.³⁴ Up to that point, the government oppressed and ignored the voices of Indians, but the occupation of

Alcatraz gave Indians hope for the future, and paved the way for later occupations that still continue today.³⁵

The Indian Occupation was part of the much larger movement for social change rooted in the 1950s. In the late sixties an increasingly large number of young Indian people became engaged in political protests and a new form of lifestyle known as "The Movement" appealed to them.³⁶ Also known as The American Indian Movement, it served the purpose of turning the attention of Indian people toward a renewal of spirituality which imparted the strength of resolve needed to reverse the "ruinous" policies of the United States, as well as Canada and other colonialist governments.³⁷ Prior to the occupation of Alcatraz, Indian activism existed as generally tribal in nature, centered in small geographic areas, and focused on specific issues such as illegal trespassing or violation of Indian treaty rights.³⁸ After the occupation, the goals of Indians expanded, and in addition to addressing small, specific issues, the AIM attacked and brought suit against the federal government on issues regarding the rights of the Native Americans that the government guaranteed in treaties, sovereignty, the U.S. Constitution, and laws.³⁹ The AIM also labored during the occupation of Alcatraz by establishing the first Indian radio broadcast, Radio Free Alcatraz that informed interested people about Indian affairs during the time of the occupation.⁴⁰ It educated occupants about treaty rights, ways of organizing, and tactics for taking over other u.s. installations in efforts to draw attention to American Indian demands for greater educational and economic opportunities and tribal rights.⁴¹ The American Indian Movement existed

as an organization that had lasting effects on the status of Native Americans in the world today.

As a result of the illegal and controversial occupation of Alcatraz, hostility between the Indian people and the United States government increased. Though laws and regulations passed in following years supporting Indian people, Native Americans in the United States remained a neglected group. The Indian Movement, which still exists today, gained momentum and power as a result of publicity and support during the occupation, which was vital in the success of the organization. Only one incident in a chain of many, the Occupation of Alcatraz demonstrated the bitterness of Indian people in the United States.

- 1 Francis J. Clauss, Alcatraz: Island of Many Mistakes. (Menlo Park, CA: Briar cliff Press Inc., 1981), pp. 55.
- 2 Troy R Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 3. 3
- "Alcatraz Transformed by U.S. Army," New York Times, 26 December 1969, p.26
- 4 John A Martini. "Search and Destroy," American Heritage, December 1999, pp. 98.
- 5 "A Proclamation of 1879" [Internet Web Site], accessed 1 November 2002, available from <http://ditrital.hmlrv.okstate.edu/kaoolerlvollhtml/files/PROO937.html#mn2>
- 6 "Fort Laramie Treaty, 1868" [Internet Web Site}, accessed 4 November 2002, available from <http://www.pbs.O1.3fwetaIthewestlresourceslarchiveslfour/ftlaram.htm>
- 7 Adam Fortunate Eagle, Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), pp. 10.
- 8 Clauss, pp. 56.
- 9 Troy R Johnson, Indian Land Forever. (The Regents of the University of California Press, 1994), pp. 1. 10 *Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, pp.4.
- 11 "Occupation: Indians Settle on Alcatraz," New York Times, 29 December 1969, p.37.
- 12 Troy R Johnson, You Are On Indian Land!. (The Regents of the University of California, 1995), pp.24. 13 "People Encourage Indians," New York Times, 10 December 1969, pp. 43.
- 14 Robert Cameron, Alcatraz. (San Francisco, CA: Cameron and Company Inc., 1989), pp.85.
- 15 *Johnson, You Are On Indian Land!*, pp. 9.
- 16 Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island, pp. 186.
- 17 Craig Glassner, "The National Park Service: Alcatraz Island" [Internet Web Site], accessed 22 September 2002, available from www.nps.gov/alcatraz/indian4.html.
- 18 Glassner.
- 19 Fortunate Eagle, pp. 41.
- 20 Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island, pp. 173.
- 21 Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island, pp. 172.
- 22 Fortunate Eagle, pp. 195.
- 23 Francis Paul Pmcha, The Indians in American Society, (University of California Press, 1985), pp.84. 24 *Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, pp. 218.
- 25 "Indian Self-Determination Act," [Internet Web Site], accessed 1 November 2002, available from <http://www.fafweb.com/subsriptionlactive default aso?ItemID=WE32>.
- 26 "Richard Nixon's Resignation, 1974," [Internet Web Site], accessed 30 October 2002, available from <http://www.luminetnet-tgortlresign.htm>
- 27 Prucha, pp. 86
- 28 Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island, pp. 196.
- 29 *Johnson, You Are On Indian Land!*, pp. 151.
- 30 *Johnson, Indian Land Forever*, pp. 3.
- 31 Clauss, pp. 57.
- 32 Jolene Babyak, Eve Witness on Alcatraz. (Berkeley, CA: Ariel Vamp Press, 1988), pp. 122.

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The large amount of support of the Indian occupants is highlighted in this article. It documents various parades, banners, and signs created in honor of the Native Americans on Alcatraz. The article rightfully claims that without the support of the surrounding Bay Area communities, the Indian occupation would have been an immediate failure.

Secondary Sources

Anonymous. "Indians Recall Alcatraz". The Press Democrat. 21 May, 2001.

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Johnson, Troy R. ~ndian Land Forever. The Regents of the University of CA Press, 1994.

Compiled by a research scholar in the American Indian Studies Center, this book included personal stories and opinions of Indians regarding their treatment at the time of the occupation. The book served more of a personal purpose, to help people get an understanding of the attitudes of the Indian people. Numerous poems, songs, and quotes written about their struggles and triumphs, appeared. These published works came directly from the occupants them selves. Though not very helpful as a source of factual information, this book was necessary in the research process in order to gain a complete knowledge of the Indian people.

Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

This book focused on the actual Occupation of 1969, and the after math of it. In a very understandable way, every imaginable fact or event related to the occupation is written about in chronological order. Johnson provides a two-sided account of the occupation, so that we not only learn the story of Indians, but of the U.S. government as well. Written many years after the occupation, Johnson included a lot of information about events that branched off of the occupation, such as the rise of Indian activism. Johnson also documented the unrest of the surrounding Bay Area community, which he used to establish the fact that the occupation had an effect on many people.

Johnson, You Are On Indian Land! The Regents of the University of CA Press,
1995.

This collection of photographs offered an exclusive look into the days and nights spent by hundreds of Indian people who were involved in the occupation. Through pictures and captions, the author described controversial events that occurred during the occupation. One incident was the vandalism of land marks on the island. Buildings were defaced with red paint, cell walls were written on, and federal property was destroyed by fire. Through these actions, the hostility of the Indian people is eminently captured.

Martini, John A. "Search and Destroy". American Heritage. December 19, 1999.

Though not entirely relevant to the Indian aspect of the Island, this magazine article includes many important dates. Martini chronologically wrote about when the island was first inhabited by early Spanish settlers in the early 1500s, then Indians claimed it and used it for tribal duties, then a fort was built on the island by the U.S. military, and so on, and he continued up until today. This was very helpful in understanding the order of important events in the history of Alcatraz.

Prucha, Francis Paul. The Indians in American Society. University of CA Press, 1985.

Prucha wrote his novel based on the treatment of Indians in America, dating back to the earliest civilizations in our nation's history. He documented how since their arrival in America, Indians have been taken advantage of and treated poorly. Prucha claimed that the United States government freely and frequently uses its authority to remove Indians from land when it is convenient for the government, and place them in insufficient lands. It is noted that the tribes that were removed from lands were not segregated in any way, just moved together on a common, minute land. Very often the tribes did not get along with each other, yet the government refused to hear any cases from the Indians to stand up for themselves, because technically, they weren't always citizens of America. This unfair treatment, Prucha argued, is what sparked many acts of rebellion later in American history.

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This official web site of the Island of Alcatraz contained very detailed accounts of every aspect of the history of the island. This entailed summaries of the first uses of The Rock, how the island is used today, the island under the U.S. military, and the Native American Occupation of 1969. In order to demonstrate his acute knowledge of the island, Glassner, the Chief Ranger of National Park Services, re-told legends, narrated events, and gave facts about important incidents that had a major impact on the island. The web-site touched on every historical aspect of the history Of Alcatraz, and contained a lot of helpful information.

Johnson, Troy R. ~ndian Land Forever. The Regents of the University of CA Press, 1994.

Compiled by a research scholar in the American Indian Studies Center, this book included personal stories and opinions of Indians regarding their treatment at the time of the occupation. The book served more of a personal purpose, to help people get an understanding of the attitudes of the Indian people. Numerous poems, songs, and quotes written about their struggles and triumphs, appeared. These published works came directly from the occupants them selves. Though not very helpful as a source of factual information, this book was necessary in the research process in order to gain a complete knowledge of the Indian people.

Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

This book focused on the actual Occupation of 1969, and the after math of it. In a very understandable way, every imaginable fact or event related to the occupation is written about in chronological order. Johnson provides a two-sided account of the occupation, so that we not only learn the story of Indians, but of the U.S. government as well. Written many years after the occupation, Johnson included a lot of information about events that branched off of the occupation, such as the rise of Indian activism. Johnson also documented the unrest of the surrounding Bay Area community, which he used to establish the fact that the occupation had an effect on many people.

Johnson, You Are On Indian Land! The Regents of the University of CA Press,
1995.

This collection of photographs offered an exclusive look into the days and nights spent by hundreds of Indian people who were involved in the occupation. Through pictures and captions, the author described controversial events that occurred during the occupation. One incident was the vandalism of land marks on the island. Buildings were defaced with red paint, cell walls were written on, and federal property was destroyed by fire. Through these actions, the hostility of the Indian people is eminently captured.

Martini, John A. "Search and Destroy". American Heritage. December 19, 1999.

Though not entirely relevant to the Indian aspect of the Island, this magazine article includes many important dates. Martini chronologically wrote about when the island was first inhabited by early Spanish settlers in the early 1500s, then Indians claimed it and used it for tribal duties, then a fort was built on the island by the U.S. military, and so on, and he continued up until today. This was very helpful in understanding the order of important events in the history of Alcatraz.

Prucha, Francis Paul. The Indians in American Society. University of CA Press, 1985.

Prucha wrote his novel based on the treatment of Indians in America, dating back to the earliest civilizations in our nation's history. He documented how since their arrival in America, Indians have been taken advantage of and treated poorly. Prucha claimed that the United States government freely and frequently uses its authority to remove Indians from land when it is convenient for the government, and place them in insufficient lands. It is noted that the tribes that were removed from lands were not segregated in any way, just moved together on a common, minute land. Very often the tribes did not get along with each other, yet the government refused to hear any cases from the Indians to stand up for themselves, because technically, they weren't always citizens of America. This unfair treatment, Prucha argued, is what sparked many acts of rebellion later in American history.