

“The Occupation of Alcatraz (1969): Occupation, Legislation, and Sensation”

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When eighty-nine American Indians set out to occupy Alcatraz Island in the early morning hours of November 20, 1969, they had little idea that their symbolic occupation would be, not only a huge step for the “Red Power” movement, but also a propellant of Native desires to the forefront of American policy. In Part One, this essay will describe the occupation’s inciting incidents, the event itself, the motivations of several key players, and the media reaction. In Part Two, this essay will highlight positive legislation that came about as a result of the occupation. In Part Three, this essay will explore the occupation’s profound impact on the Red Power movement, as well as address the argument that the occupation did not have a very far reaching impact at all. This essay will conclude that, in the wake of their boats, these eighty-nine Native Indians left an ultimately positive impact on the lives of Native people for years to come.

Part One: Occupation

The Occupation of Alcatraz Island lasted fourteen months from November 20, 1969 to June 11, 1971. However, the first incidents involving Alcatraz Island actually started five years earlier. In 1964, a small group of Sioux occupied the island for four hours, claiming that Alcatraz should be owned by the collective Indian.¹ Unfortunately, this protest was short lived. The occupiers left under threat that they would be charged with a felony.² After this first “occupation,” community leader Adam Nordwall, also known as Adam Fortunate Eagle, and Mohawk Richard Oakes, a student

¹ Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz! The Indian Occupation of 1969–1971* (Heyday Books, 1992), 15.

² Ibid, 18.

activist, became independently obsessed with winning the island for Indian people.³ More permanent applications were then filed in an attempt to legally transform the buildings on Alcatraz into an Indian cultural center.

A desire for more immediate action to claim the space was spurred by the loss of the San Francisco Indian Center (SFIC) to fire on October 10, 1969. With the burning of the SFIC, Indians had no place of their own; the problem of not having facilities to meet the needs of the area's Indian community soon became a crisis.⁴ Then, when Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel offered to turn Alcatraz into a National Park, protesters mobilized.⁵ Strategy shifted from formal applications to a more immediate takeover.⁶ Richard McKenzie, an occupation participant, was steadfast: "Kneel-Ins, Sit-Ins, Sleep-Ins... [will] not help us. We have to occupy... government buildings before things change."⁷

On November 20, 1969, eighty-nine American Indians, including over thirty female students and six children⁸, set out to occupy Alcatraz Island.⁹ Adam Fortunate Eagle, Richard Oakes, and Shoshone Bannock LaNada Means, head of the Native American Student Organization at the University of California- Berkeley, mobilized a larger group of student activists.¹⁰ Some other key members of the occupation were Joe Morris (a representative of the Longshoreman's Union, which threatened to close both ports if the Occupiers were removed), and "the Voice of Alcatraz," John Trudell (whose radio show informed the American public of how the Occupation was going - on

³ Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press 1997), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵ Dean J. Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 72(2): 201-227.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Troy R. Johnson, *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self-determination* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska 2008), 36.

⁸ Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!*, 61.

⁹ Kelly, "Détournement," 168.

¹⁰ Donna Hightower Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," *Hypatia* 18, 2: 2003, 120.

site).¹¹ Though they started out small, at the height of the occupation there were 400 people on the island. The occupation's goal was made explicitly clear in the name they chose to call themselves—Indians of All Tribes (IOAT).¹² The occupiers wanted to make a statement that would awaken the American people, especially the federal government, to what Indians were going through.¹³ Most importantly, they hoped the occupation would lead to an easing of Native poverty and despair.¹⁴

In 1968, a Senate subcommittee stated that over 50,000 Indian families lived in unsanitary, dilapidated dwellings, and that their average annual income was \$1500, 25% of the national average at that time.¹⁵ Walter Wetzell, leader of the Blackfeet of Montana and former president of the National Congress of American Indians, urged others to join the protest: “We Indians have been struggling... We must strike!”¹⁶ Soon after the occupation began, the IOAT released a Proclamation of their conditions addressed to “The Great White Father and All His People.”¹⁷ They claimed Alcatraz was theirs “by right of discovery,” sarcastically offering to buy it for “\$24 in glass beads and red cloth”—the same price that Indians supposedly received for the island of Manhattan. The activists added that they did not mind that the island was underdeveloped or lacked fresh water, since most of them had already endured similar conditions on Indian reservations. In a statement he made in 1969, Adam Fortunate Eagle expressed of Alcatraz, “buildings, all empty, falling apart from neglect. And we have nothing!”¹⁸ In 1969, that account of the Alcatraz Island was not that far from

¹¹ Troy R. Johnson, “Roots of Contemporary Native American Activism,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 20(2): 127–154.

¹² Casey Ryan Kelly, “Détournement, Decolonization, and the American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969–1971).” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2014), 168.

¹³ Troy R. Johnson, *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self-determination* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska 2008), 49.

¹⁴ Daryl Lembke, “Alcatraz Now Symbol of Liberty: ALCATRAZ SYMBOL” Dec 21, 1969, *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Times Mirror Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

¹⁵ Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!*, 19.

¹⁶ Johnson, *The American Indian*, 37.

¹⁷ Smith, *Like a Hurricane*, 28-29. & Evan Andrews, “Native American Activists Occupy Alcatraz Island, 45 Years Ago.” *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

¹⁸ Johnson, *The American Indian*, 50.

the truth. The *New York Times* said that the island was virtually abandoned and had fallen to ruin after its closing in 1962,¹⁹ far from how we know it today.

In a different occupying statement, the IOAT cited the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, between the U.S. and the Lakota, for their justification in owning Alcatraz. The treaty states that all retired, abandoned, or out-of-use federal land was to be returned to the Native people from whom it was taken. Since Alcatraz penitentiary had been closed on March 21, 1963, and the island had been declared surplus federal property in 1964, the island qualified for reclamation and was, thus, rightfully theirs. Under the Treaty, the occupiers wanted complete control for the purpose of building a Native American cultural center, spiritual center, ecology center, and an American Indian Museum. The centers would include full-time Indian consultants, teachers, librarians, and staff in order to tell the story of Indians of All Tribes.²⁰

This occupation soon became a far-reaching movement, meaningful to thousands of people. Mohawk Marilyn Miracle, an occupation participant, was interviewed February 5, 1970, saying “we have had letters of support from tribal leaders across the country, involved in different organizations, from tribal councils. . . People all over believe in what we’re doing, so we have to continue.”²¹ On Thanksgiving Day 1970, hundreds of supporters made their way to Alcatraz to celebrate the occupation, bringing food and other items to the people on the island.²² In December, John Trudell, began making daily radio broadcasts from the island, and in January 1971, occupiers began publishing a newsletter. Joseph Morris, a Blackfoot member of the local longshoreman's union, rented space on Pier 40 to facilitate the transportation of supplies and people to the island.²³

¹⁹ “INDIANS EXPELLED FROM ALCATRAZ: 15 Are Seized on Island by Force of 35 Marshals” Jun 12, 1971, *New York Times* (New York, NY: New York Times Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

²⁰ Smith, *Like a Hurricane*, 76.

²¹ Troy R. Johnson, “Voices from Alcatraz Island” *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self-determination* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 2008), 125.

²² “Occupation 1969: Alcatraz is not an island” (2001), PBS Documentary

²³ *Ibid.*

As the occupation went on, however, students got bored²⁴ and many of the original occupiers left to return to school. By late May, the government had cut off all electrical power, telephone service, and removed the water barge which had provided fresh water to the occupiers.²⁵ Three days following the removal of the water barge, a fire broke out on the island, destroying several historic buildings and the lighthouse. The government blamed the Indians; the Indians blamed undercover government infiltrators.²⁶ Allegedly in an attempt to raise money to buy food, occupiers began stripping copper wiring and tubing from the buildings to sell as scrap metal. Three of the occupiers were arrested, tried, and convicted for selling 600lbs of copper.²⁷ Then, tragically, in January 1970, 13-year-old Yvonne Oakes, the stepdaughter of occupation leader Richard Oakes, fell to her death from a watchtower. Despite several children who say she was pushed from the tower by a member of an opposing interest group on the island,²⁸ there was insufficient evidence to prosecute.²⁹ The Oakes family left Alcatraz shortly afterwards, saying they did not have the heart for it anymore.³⁰ Without leadership, power, fresh water, or public support, occupiers began leaving the island in droves. In January 1971, two oil tankers collided in the entrance of the San Francisco Bay. Though it was acknowledged by the tankers that the lack of an Alcatraz light or fog horn played no part in the collision, it was enough to push the federal government into action.³¹ On June 11, 1971, a large force of government officers, armed to the teeth, removed the last 15 people from Alcatraz.

²⁴ Earl Caldwell, "Teen-Age Indians Occupying Alcatraz Are Feeling Grip of Boredom," Feb 22, 1970, *New York Times* (New York, NY: New York Times Company) Accessed April, 27, 2017. Newsprint.

²⁵ Troy Johnson, "We Hold the Rock: The Alcatraz Indian Occupation." *National Parks Service*. U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Troy Johnson, "The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Roots of American Indian Activism." *Wicazo Sa Review* 10, no. 2 (1994): 70.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Most news coverage did not look favorably on the “ALCATRAZ INVASION,” as the San Francisco Chronicle called it.³² The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the hostility of the occupiers prevented federal agents from gaining access to the island.³³ This problematic characterization of Native people as violent was unsubstantiated, feeding into the narrative that the Natives were disruptive and dangerous. On a similar note, the US Attorney General said that the Indians were removed because the “good faith negotiations” had been unproductive and “an intolerable situation” had been created.³⁴ The *New York Times* also reported that the Coast Guard wanted to replace the fog horn and lighthouse damaged by the fire.³⁵ However, in a later article contradicting themselves, the *New York Times* said the “Indians had wrecked [the lighthouse],” rather than that the damage had been caused by fire.³⁶ According to Adam Fortunate Eagle’s personal account on the Island, however, the violent characterization of the occupiers seems to be a gross over-exaggeration. The only outward danger, according to him, was one, 42-cent arrow shot at a passing boat for repeatedly coming too close (its wake slamming Indian boats into pilings), and rocks thrown at passing boats because of derogatory comments shouted at the occupiers.³⁷ We see in contemporary news reports, that the occupiers were dangerous, but, perhaps in actual practice, this is not an honest representation. It is hard to see, however, if that hostility only came from outside the island. The *Los Angeles Times* mentions caretakers John Hart and Glen Dodson- non-Native individuals who lived on the Island before, during, and after the occupation. Dodson says, “I’m 100% with them ... These

³² March 9, 1964, headline of the San Francisco Chronicle. & Johnson, *The American Indian*, 16.

³³ “Alaska Next, Indians on Alcatraz Say,” Nov 25, 1969, *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, Calif: Times Mirror Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

³⁴ “INDIANS EXPELLED FROM ALCATRAZ: 15 Are Seized on Island by Force of 35 Marshals” Jun 12, 1971, *New York Times* (New York, NY: New York Times Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

³⁵ Earl Caldwell, “ALCATRAZ INDIANS SHORT OF WATER: Declare the Island Off Limits to Government Personnel” Aug 16, 1970, *New York Times* (New York, NY: New York Times Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

³⁶ “Light Tower on Alcatraz Restored in Reoccupation” Jun 14, 1971, *New York Times* (New York, NY: New York Times Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

are wonderful people.”³⁸ But in a different source, John Hart said that it appeared Indians “made [Alcatraz] noticeably worse.” News sources seem to have their own bias/ harmful rhetoric. This is concerning when dealing with a Native narrative and since most of us were not there - it is hard to tell from these accounts what is true and what represents prejudice or special interest.

The negative press did not only come from the media and law enforcement, however. Backlash also came from Indian leaders. In 1969, Pawnee John Knifechief said the occupiers were spoiled: “They have no reason whatsoever to be militant or be demanding of anything... they have everything. They can do whatever they want to do... the biggest part of them kids don’t know anything about reservation life. I really don’t understand what they are demanding because they have educational opportunities that we didn’t have. There’s grants that Indian students can get. They can better themselves if they want to.”³⁹ John Knifechief and others did not feel connected to the unifying message proclaimed by the occupiers. Instead, they felt like those on Alcatraz Island were giving a bad name to Native people and were, essentially, complaining about nothing.

Some news, however, did bring a warm image of the occupation to American minds. According to the *Sun Reporter*, the Native people brought music and culture to the vacant island.⁴⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* wrote a hopeful article, “There is not much doubt now that the occupation ... has mushroomed into something important for the Indians’ future.” That Alcatraz became a kind of “West Coast ‘Statue of Liberty’ for Indians.”⁴¹ Despite often negative reports, most Occupiers were satisfied that the occupation was widely known to the public at the time. Fortunate Eagle agreed that

³⁸ “Alaska Next, Indians on Alcatraz Say,” Nov 25, 1969, Newsprint.

³⁹ Johnson, *The American Indian*, 88.

⁴⁰ Marion Fay, “Indians Get It Together On Alcatraz” Dec 13, 1969, *Sun Reporter* (San Francisco: Calif.) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

⁴¹ Daryl Lembke, “Alcatraz Now Symbol of Liberty: ALCATRAZ SYMBOL” Dec 21, 1969, *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Times Mirror Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

the occupation brought Indian issues to the forefront of the public awareness: “Alcatraz had the attention of the nation,”⁴² and this, ultimately, led the Government to initiate changes.

Part Two: Legislation

The Occupation of Alcatraz had a direct effect on federal Indian policy and, with visible results, established a precedent for Indian activism. After a negotiating meeting at Alcatraz, Robert Pitts, United States Regional Director of Housing and Urban Development, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “There is a need to take another look at any and all federal programs dealing with... the American Indian.”⁴³ While the Nixon Administration did not accede to all the demands of the protesters, federal policy began to progress away from tribal termination (United States policy from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s which eliminated Native Tribal legal rights, land, and association with the intent to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society⁴⁴) and toward Indian autonomy. In Nixon’s Indian message, July 8, 1970, he decried termination, proclaiming, “Self-determination among Indian people can and must be encouraged without the threat of eventual termination.”⁴⁵

After the occupation, Congress passed many laws that made life better for Indians. Major ones include, in chronological order:

1. The Indian Education Act (IEA) 1972, provided supplemental funding to 1,100 Indian school districts.⁴⁶
2. The Indian Health Service (IHS) budget more than doubled between 1970 and 1975.

⁴² Nicole Lapin, "1969 Alcatraz Takeover 'changed the Whole Course of History!'" *CNN*. Cable News Network, 20 Nov. 2009. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

⁴³ Daryl Lembke, “U.S. Officials, Alcatraz Indian Leaders Confer” Dec 3, 1969, *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Times Mirror Company) Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

⁴⁴ Getches, David H.; Wilkinson, Charles F.; Williams, Robert L. (2005). *Cases and Materials on Federal Indian Law*. St. Paul, MN: Thomson/West. pp. 199–216.

⁴⁵ Nicole Lapin, "1969 Alcatraz Takeover," *CNN*.

⁴⁶ History of Indian Education." *U.S. Department of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2017. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oie/history.html>.

3. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 began the process of bringing self-governance back to Indian country.⁴⁷ Prior to the Act, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) determined where Indian children went to school, what leases on Indian land, timber, water and minerals were contracted, what payments were made to individual Indians of welfare and other important matters. After this Act was passed, tribes could contract to operate these services themselves, everything from tribal government to tribal courts, jails, tribal enrollment, education, social services and other important functions.⁴⁸
4. The Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission was established in 1975 following the Boldt decision in 1974, which ruled that the Indians of Washington were entitled to half the salmon and steelhead in Washington state.⁴⁹
5. In 1976, Nixon established the Office of Indian Water Rights to protect the most precious Indian resource in the dry West. The office represents tribes in water negotiations, enforcing the Winters doctrine, which guarantees Indian reservations first rights to waters flowing through the reservation.⁵⁰
6. Congress passed the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (1976) to improve the health-care system under IHS.⁵¹ It includes a program of scholarships to Indians to study medicine, dentistry, psychiatry, nursing and pharmacy. This program has funded the education of more than 8,000 Indian students in health-care fields.
7. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978) ensures that Indians would not be punished or prosecuted for practicing their religions.⁵²
8. The BIA created the Branch of Acknowledgement and Research (BAR) (1978) in response to requests from tribes for reversal of the termination of their treaties and in response to tribes seeking federal recognition for the first time.
9. The Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), which let tribes have some input in the adoption of Indian children and the placement of orphan children.⁵³ This was in response to the fact that 25 to 35 percent of Indian children were taken, by non-Indians, to adoptive homes, foster homes and child-care institutions.
10. The Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act (1978), authorized the operation of community colleges on Indian reservations.⁵⁴ Within a decade there were a handful of tribal colleges, and today there are 36. They have made important contributions to Indian

⁴⁷ Occupation 1969, Alcatraz is not an island, PBS

⁴⁸ Russel L. Barsh and Ronald L. Trosper, "Title I of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975." *American Indian Law Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (1995)

⁴⁹ "About Us," *Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission*, accessed April 27, 2017, <http://nwifc.org/about-us/>.

⁵⁰ "Indian Affairs | Branch of Water Resources," *US Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs*, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OTS/NaturalResources/Water/index.htm>.

⁵¹ "100th Congress – 1987 and 1988 | Legislative History," *Indian Health Service*, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.ihs.gov/ihsia/history/100th/>.

⁵² Jack Utter, "American Indians: Answers to Today's Question" (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 157- 158.

⁵³ "Indian Child Welfare Act 1978 (ICWA) Compliance - National Indian Child Welfare Association," *NICWA: National Indian Child Welfare Association*, accessed April 27, 2017, http://www.nicwa.org/Indian_Child_Welfare_Act/.

⁵⁴ Michael A. Olivas, *The Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978: The Failure of Federal Indian Higher Education Policy*, 1982. Accessed April 27, 2017, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED227973>

country, including an employment rate of graduates that ranges between 85 and 90 percent, compared to only 55 percent employment in Indian country overall.

Part Three: Sensation (Effects and Influence, or Lack Thereof)

While the federal laws and programs mentioned in Part Two have started to improve life for Indians on reservations, many believe the US Government has undermined Indians so badly in the past several centuries that it will take generations to make life truly better for Indian people. Dean Chavers, a writer for the Indian Country Media Network, notes that the US Government has “a long way to go... And some things can never be corrected.”⁵⁵ He highlights that some reservations such as Pine Ridge and Hoopa have had unemployment rates of 85 percent as recently as 2011, and that Indian health care still has many gaps, as Indians die from heart disease, tuberculosis and diabetes at much higher rates than the general population.⁵⁶ Chief War Jack also noted in 2016, that many of the issues that faced Native people then still exist today, including broken treaties and Congress not recognizing/limiting Indian people.⁵⁷

Even several of the legislations specifically listed in Part Two have problems. Despite the help of the Indian Education Act (IEA), Indian education is still the worst in the nation, with a 50 percent dropout rate, test scores below the 20th percentile, and the lowest rate of college attendance in the nation—17 percent, compared to more than 60 percent generally.⁵⁸ The Indian Health Service (IHS) still has a 35 percent vacancy rate for its professional positions, and a misrepresentation of health services that plagued reservations in the middle of the 20th century had devastating effects on the lives and reproductive rights of hundreds of women (read more: Blackmore, Erin. “The

⁵⁵ Dean Chavers, "Alcatraz Occupation Four Decades Ago Led to Many Benefits for American Indians." *Indian Country Media Network*. 14 Nov. 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2017. & He notes, specifically, the physical and sexual abuse Indian children suffered in boarding schools, and the loss of two-thirds of Indian lands between 1888 and 1938.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Roselynn Wahtomy, “Alcatraz Island occupation remembered,” Feb 18, 2016, *Fort Hall Business Council* (Fort Hall: Idaho), Accessed April, 24, 2017. Newsprint.

⁵⁸ Chavers, "Alcatraz Occupation”

Little-Known History of the Forced Sterilization of Native American Women.”⁵⁹ Many tribes that were terminated between 1953 and 1966, are still not recognized by the federal government, and are without access to valuable resources. Nixon’s Indian message, decrying termination, also did little, as slow bureaucracy hindered its goals. Almost to seal the fate of Native people, in 1972, exhausted by the occupation of the BIA, Nixon announced he was “through doing things to help Indians.”⁶⁰

Despite these very real problems, those who say that the occupation of Alcatraz did nothing to help Native people would be ignoring the very real, very positive influences that did come directly from it. During the period the occupiers were on Alcatraz Island, President Nixon returned the Blue Lake and 48,000 acres of land to the Taos Indians.⁶¹ The occupation encouraged others to fight back, sparking more than 200 instances of civil disobedience among Native people: at Plymouth Rock, Mount Rushmore, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Trail of Broken Treaties, Wounded Knee, the Longest Walk and dozens of others across the country.⁶² Many planners/ participants of later occupations and protests had been involved in the occupation of Alcatraz or had at least gained strength from the new “Indianness” Alcatraz generated.⁶³ The occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington, D.C. would lead to the hiring of Native Americans in the federal agency,⁶⁴ which gave greater autonomy and agency to Native people and Native choices.

The Occupation of Alcatraz, which came to be known as the “cradle of the modern Native American civil rights movement,”⁶⁵ also brought international attention to the plight of Native

⁵⁹ Blackmore, Erin. “The Little-Known History of the Forced Sterilization of Native American Women.” *JSTOR*, JSTOR, Aug. 2016, 25, daily.jstor.org/the-little-known-history-of-the-forced-sterilization-of-native-american-women/.

⁶⁰ Dean J. Kotlowski, “Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 72(2): 201–227.

⁶¹ Johnson, “We Hold the Rock” *National Parks Service*.

⁶² Evan Andrews, “Native American Activists Occupy Alcatraz Island, 45 Years Ago.” *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

⁶³ Johnson, *The American Indian*, 219.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

⁶⁵ Adam Fortunate Eagle, and Tim Findley, *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2008), 203.

people. Celebrities Jane Fonda, Anthony Quinn, Marlon Brando, Jonathan Winters, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Dick Gregory visited the island to show their support.⁶⁶ The rock band, Creedence Clearwater Revival, supported the Occupation with a \$15,000 donation.⁶⁷ In 1973, Marlon Brando had Apache Sacheen Littlefeather refuse to accept the Best Actor Oscar on his behalf for his performance in "The Godfather."⁶⁸ This protest of the Oscars, and general celebrity involvement, helped to bring Native Rights into the public eye, inspiring petitions, donations, and change. In 1969, mainstream culture was definitely not on board with the occupation, yet, in the wake of the occupation, the media reaction towards it has changed. On the 50th anniversary of the event, *CNN* said the occupation of Alcatraz "changed the whole course of history ... for the government and its relationship with the Indians."⁶⁹

Possibly most importantly, the occupation inspired and revitalized Native people. Wilma Mankiller, a Cherokee occupation participant, said in a letter on November 27, 1991, "For the first time, people were saying things I felt but hadn't known how to articulate. It was very liberating." John Trudell felt similarly, "Alcatraz put me back into my community and helped me remember who I am. It was a rekindling of the spirit. Alcatraz made it easier for us to remember who we are."⁷⁰ Adam Fortunate Eagle also writes in his personal account of the occupation, "it must always be known that, more than anything else, Alcatraz brought us together."⁷¹ So, while many people thought and still think that these Natives were crazy for taking over an island prison in San Francisco Bay, the changes that were set into motion have been long lasting and positive, not only

⁶⁶ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 528

⁶⁷ Dean J. Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond: The Nixon and Ford Administrations Respond to Native American Protest," *Pacific Historical Review*, 72(2): 201–227.

⁶⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QUacU0I4yU>

⁶⁹ Nicole Lapin, "1969 Alcatraz Takeover," *CNN*.

⁷⁰ Alex Arbuckle, "When Native American Activists Took Control of Alcatraz for 18 Months." *Mashable*. Retronaut, 13 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

⁷¹ Eagle, *Heart of the Rock*, 205.

for the Indian psyche but in political practice. There is always more to be done, of course, and as Adam Fortunate Eagle says, “like all really good stories, [there is] no real end.”

Conclusion

The success or failure of the Occupation of Alcatraz Island should not be judged by whether the overt demands for title to the island and the establishment of educational and cultural institutions were realized. The underlying goals of the Indians on the island were to awaken the American public to the plight of the first Americans and to assert the need for Indian self-determination. In this, they were indeed successful. However, the effort had a positive impact far beyond simple awareness raising. As a direct result of the occupation, federal policies of relocation and termination were abandoned and numerous laws were passed to support Native self-determination, recognition, health, and education. Tribal lands across the country were returned, from Mount Adams in Washington to Blue Lake in New Mexico. Many occupation veterans continued their activism, participating in further demonstrations. The occupation’s influence even reached the White House. In his address to Congress, Nixon admitted, “the time has come ... for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions.”⁷²

Benjamin Bratt, actor and Alcatraz occupier said it best: “It’s easy to pass off the Alcatraz event as largely symbolic, but the truth is, the spirit and dream of Alcatraz never died, it simply found its way to other fights.”⁷³ Native sovereignty, repatriation, environmental justice, and struggle for basic human rights are issues Native people were fighting then and are still fighting today, at Standing Rock and elsewhere. The Occupation of Alcatraz helped give Native people the courage to

⁷² President Nixon, “Message to Congress,” July 8, 1970.

⁷³ Nicole Lapin, “1969 Alcatraz Takeover,” *CNN*.

stand up. Ultimately, without the Occupation of Alcatraz, there would have been no propellant or precedent to inspire Native Activism, subsequently changing the lives of thousands of people.

Pictures:



- November 29, 1965. (AP images)



- November 1969. (AP Images)
- Activists occupy the main cell block.



- Dec. 1, 1969. (ROBERT KLEIN/AP images)
- Richard Oakes, left, greets U.S. Attorney Cecil Poole as he arrives for negotiations with the occupiers.



- Feb. 6, 1970 (BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES)



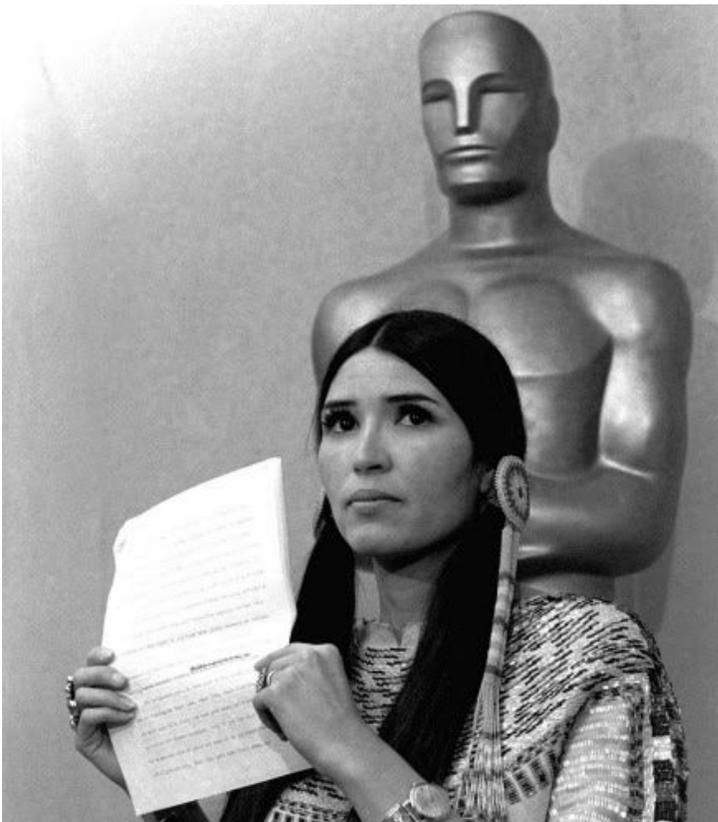
- May 31, 1970 (BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES)



- 1970 (SAL VEDER/AP images)
- Occupation leader Richard Oakes.



- June 2, 1971. (BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES)
- John Trudell watches a fire consume the lighthouse and other buildings.



- March 27, 1973 (Associated Press)
- Sacheen Littlefeather holds up a statement that she read to the press, at the Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles on behalf of Marlon Brando.