

The Legacy of the Occupation of Alcatraz: Sparking Native American Resistance

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Reflecting in 1994 on the occupation of Alcatraz 25 years earlier, Vine Deloria, Jr. stated, “we want[ed] change, but we do not know what change.”¹ The author of *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Deloria was a well-known activist during the 1960s and was invited to the island of Alcatraz during the occupation. Lasting from November 1969 to June 1971, the occupation occurred at a time when tensions between minority groups and the government were high. Native Americans had been forcibly removed from their traditional lands and confined to impoverished reservations through relocation and assimilation programs. Treaties had been broken and living standards were abysmal. The occupation was a response to this seemingly continuous cycle of abuse perpetrated by the American government. Deloria viewed the it as ineffective because it did not spur government action to address Native American grievances or lead directly to a noticeable improvement in living conditions on reservations. Deloria still claimed in 1994 that the occupation had no impact on Native American rights.²

Although the occupation did not end the oppression of Native Americans or reverse the effects of the termination and relocation policies, it was not as ineffective as Deloria suggests. For the occupiers themselves, and millions of Native Americans across the county, Alcatraz was the spark that ignited an era of Indigenous cultured resurgence, wide spread collaboration, and a legacy of protests that changed Native American life. Relying on written documents and interviews with the occupiers this paper traces the history of Alcatraz and its legacy today, 45 years later, demonstrating that it has had a profound impact on Native American resistance ever since. The occupiers at Alcatraz may not have know exactly what it was they wanted, but the occupation was an important step in figuring it out.

Relocation and Termination: American Indian Policy

The occupation of Alcatraz was in large part a reaction to American Indian policies before and during the 20th century. These government policies are part of a history of assimilation and termination of Native American practices that predates American independence.³ In the early 20th century federal policies, historians Daniel Cobb and Loretta Fowler note, implemented “plenary power” that viewed Native Americans as “children” of the state.⁴ During the First and Second World Wars, according to Native Studies scholar Donald Fixico, Native Americans left their reserves to help with the war

¹ Vine Deloria, Jr., “Alcatraz, Activism, and Accommodation,” *American Indian Activism*, Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne eds. from *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (1994): 51.

² *Ibid.*, 133.

³ Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 8.

⁴ Daniel M Cobb and Loretta Fowler, eds., *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900*, (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), xii.

efforts, this later led to the American government to determine that, "many Indians have been assimilated into mainstream society and no longer needed special services."⁵ Despite the work of Native Americans, such as the society of American Indians (1911), Four Mothers society (1912) and many other groups, who fought to maintain the freedom of cultural practices and resources, Native American participation in the war effort was used as justification to initiate termination and relocation programs, which were viewed by government officials as the final "liberation" of Native Americans.⁶ "Liberation" was not to give Native Americans equal rights as American citizens, but to disassociate them from all treaty rights.

Termination policies had devastating consequences for Native American individuals and communities. As Fixico argues, termination, from the government's perspective, "would liberate Native Americans from their trust status as 'second class' citizens to enjoy equal opportunities."⁷ To liberate Native Americans was to assimilate them into American culture and off their reserve land. Native Americans who left reserves to help with the war effort was believed to show that Native Americans were ready to assimilate. Federal policies such as Senate Bill 1311 in 1944, right after WW2, were protested against because it would lead to lost of reserve land.⁸ According to Cobb and Fowler, the 1946 Indian Claims Commission Act allowed for the American government to take back land from mistreated tribal funds, leading to 300 claims totaling more than \$800 million.⁹ This was the beginning of numerous policies and actions taken against Native Americans. Termination was supposedly designed to "liberate" Native Americans but in practice it oppressed their traditional culture further. Rather than achieving liberation, termination paved the way for the further expansion of government power through the restriction of Native American sovereignty land rights on reserves.

Narratives from Native Americans during the termination era highlight the impact termination policies had on Native American culture. Reflecting on his own life experiences, Fixico recalls the discrimination he endured for being Native American even as a child. He went to school off reserve but lived on a reserve just outside of Shawnee, Oklahoma. There was a different identity on and off the reserve for Fixico. Off the reserve he recalls the discrimination of teachers in classrooms: "my assigned seat was always the last seat in the row... although I usually was one of the best students with the highest marks in class."¹⁰ But on the reserve he had a sense of connection to his home: "I continued to go to stop dances in my tribal community. Our ground was Gar Creek."¹¹ "The government," Fixico continues, "hoped that if Indians left tribal communities and moved to big cities, they would lose their culture and their attachment to the land."¹² Despite experiencing widespread

⁵ Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy in the 1950s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 8.

⁶ Ibid, iv.

⁷ Ibid, iv.

⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁹ Cobb and Fowler, *Beyond Red Power*, xv.

¹⁰ Donald L. Fixico, "Witness to Change: Fifty years of Indian Activism and Tribal Politics," *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900*, Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler eds. (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 4.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Ibid, 3.

discrimination Native Americans had their own community on reserves, it was a safe place to practice and be a Native American identity. Termination policy undermined this security, exposing children like Fixico to ongoing racism and discrimination.

Relocation policies were implemented alongside termination. High poverty rates and dismal living conditions on reserves motivated Native Americans to relocate to urban centres when the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) first introduced the Voluntary Relocation Program in 1952.¹³ Though relocation was advertised as opening to Native Americans the benefits of American cities, such as jobs, health care and running water, it made leaving the reservation confusing. According to Alcatraz occupier Troy Johnson, "The frustration generated by the relocation program, particularly among young people created an angry generation [...] They had no voice, angry because they lacked a clear identity, and angry because the urban world was trying to constrain and control them."¹⁴ Leaving the reservation provided better opportunities for economic gain, but Native Americans were still facing oppression. They were treated as separate from the American public. The Voluntary Relocation program claimed that the BIA had lost its usefulness for reservations, that reservations themselves should disappear and that Native Americans should no longer receive federal economic support.¹⁵

George Horse Capture, one of the first occupiers of Alcatraz, articulates how relocation was not a solution to on-reserve poverty but an example of ongoing oppression. Horse Capture's grandparents grew up with the discrimination off the reservation and tried to keep their grandchildren from experiencing the same fate: "our grandparents, who had experienced bitter discrimination by whites all of their lives, took steps to protect us from such pain by not teaching us our tribal traditions."¹⁶ Horse Capture's grandparents tried to protect their grandchildren from discrimination by raising them in their own community, but once Horse Capture was forced to go to school off reservation he suffered from the very discrimination from which his grandparents tried to protect him. Describing the shame he felt about his Native American identity in the public school system, he wrote, "we were in the white world, where we were viewed as subhuman." No longer sheltered on the reservation, he felt he had "to assimilate into the outside world."¹⁷

Horse Capture found assimilation to be a coping mechanism to the discrimination he experienced. Discrimination was faced by numerous generations within Native American communities; some generations, like that of Horse Capture's grandparents, refused to pass down traditions because they thought it would prevent discrimination. This did rarely work, however, as the public school system shamed Horse Capture and fellow peers for not conforming to white society. Kids at school judged them by the way they dressed, and because of poverty on reservations. Horse Capture and his peers experienced barriers and limitations because of their racialized place in American society. They were seen as

¹³ Troy Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination & the Rise of Indian Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵ Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz*, Tim Findley collaboration (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 43-42.

¹⁶ George P. Horse Capture, "From the Reservation to the Smithsonian Via Alcatraz," *American Indian Activism*, Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne eds. from *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (1994), 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 141-142.

outsiders: "I was living in the white world," he recalled, "but I was never accepted when everybody else took part in school activities or chased girls. A barrier always kept me out and made me feel bad and ashamed."¹⁸ Where Horse Capture belonged in society seemed uncertain. His racial identity made him an outsider, but on the reservation he lived in poverty and "the days were filled with hunger."¹⁹ There was no place where Horse Capture or his peers felt they could explore their identities as Native Americans. Termination and relocation was adding to the many issues that Native Americans faced during the 20th century.

Making a Stand: Native American Responses to American Indian Policy

Occupying Alcatraz was a response to termination and relocation policies specifically and Native American Indian Policy generally. The first occupiers created a proclamation that used satire to protest the treatment of Native Americans by the American government and raise awareness about substandard living conditions. Traditionally used to inform the public of an important matter or to enact legislation, proclamations manifested colonialism and government power. The occupiers' satirical proclamation (Figure 1) thus mimicked the government's ongoing oppression of Native Americans and provided a historical perspective of Native American issues, eliciting sympathy for the occupiers.

The proclamation justified and clarified the reasons for the occupation.²⁰ The occupiers intended to "re-claim" the land and turn Alcatraz into a university for Native Americans: "Re-claim[ing]" the land to remind Americans that Native Americans were there first, that they were the "true history of this nation."²¹ The proclamation also highlighted the type of land and reason for inequality on reserves. It explained the reason for poverty on reservations: "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."²² It goes on to list that there was no transportation, running water, sanitation, and other basic benefits that American cities had. One of the main



Ilka Hartmann, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination & the Rise of Indian Activism*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Ibid, 142.

¹⁹ Ibid, 141.

²⁰ Eagle, *Heart of the Rock*, 74.

²¹ Proclamation, *Heart of the Rock*, 207.

²² Ibid, 208.

arguments of the proclamation is that there was no industry; therefore there was no chance of employment, which led to a dependency on the federal government.²³

The proclamation challenged federal Indian policy that claimed that "freedom" could be found in cities, not reservations. Cities were never freedom. Along with reservations, they were a mode of oppression, whether economically on reserves or socially in cities, to reject and control Native Americans. The proclamation empowered occupiers by using federal law against the government while also giving Native Americans a way to voice their grievances and demand sovereignty. Protestors used Alcatraz to build a new community where Native Americans were united and could freely be educated in their traditions and spirituality.²⁴ According to Fortunate Eagle, the Proclamation became their "document of discovery," clearly stating why they were protesting and provided foundation to start the protest on but allowed for other Native Americans to build off it.²⁵

The occupiers used the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie as the legal basis for the occupying and reacquiring Alcatraz from the American government.²⁶ This Treaty states under article VI that any government land that is not "mineral land, nor reserved by the United States for special purposes" could be obtained by Native Americans for improvements.²⁷ If the improvements on the land total than 200 dollars or more and the land is occupied for more than three years, Native Americans could obtain a patent for the land.²⁸ The occupiers mobilized this colonial past to occupy Alcatraz which had been deserted since 1963.²⁹ By using this treaty it showed the public that Native Americans had a right to land, even though termination and relocation stated otherwise.³⁰

The occupation of Alcatraz was clearly a response to Native American grievances. Adam Fortunate Eagle helped plan "A-day," the day of occupation, and on 9 November 1969 occupied Alcatraz. His reason behind the occupation was because "we were pretty upset with the fact that we'd been ignored on the reservations, the fact that our people were still being held as political prisoners, socially, economically, and politically."³¹ Seeing that the government would not take action to help Native Americans, Fortunate Eagle and other students proceeded with "A-day" to make a statement.³² He stated that the issues on reservations and the discrimination in American society created a situation where they could not educate future generations about Native American history and culture.³³ Fortunate Eagle feared that future generations would not be in touch with their heritage.

Al Miller, another organizer of the occupation, became a main spokesperson during the first days of the occupation. Very quickly attracting media attention, Miller was

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 133.

²⁷ Yale Law School, "Transcript of Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868)," Article VI, Avalon Project, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=42&page=transcript>

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ "History and Culture," para. 2, National Park Services: U.S. Department of the Interior, <http://www.nps.gov/alca/historyculture/index.htm>

³⁰ Wilkinson, *Blood struggle*, 133.

³¹ Eagle, *Heart of the Rock*, 75.

³² Ibid., 77.

³³ Ibid, 62.

interviewed by KPIX, the local news television channel, and immediately came to be seen as one of the main representatives of the occupation of Alcatraz.³⁴ In his interview, Miller stressed the importance of their message of sovereignty, but video footage that was also part of the interview very clearly and visually stressed why the movement was important. The video shows the occupiers practicing Native American dance and socializing with each other.³⁵ Over time, numerous peoples started voicing demands to the government and the unified voice of the first few days was lost. But the initial unity was important because, beyond demanding policy and societal change, occupiers were able to demonstrate what change could be. Freedom and the sense of community instilled on Alcatraz had a long-term effect on the Occupiers and many others.

The Legacy of the Occupation

Even after the occupation was disbanded, with no change in government policy, it brought awareness to the grievances that had long oppressed Native Americans. The university students had started the protest with the proclamation, demanding change to help create a sovereign identity where there would be free to educate and raise future generations within traditional cultures. Richard Oakes, another spokesperson for the occupation, wrote, "there's a dual sense of justice in this country. We'd like an end to this. And I think this here- manning the island of Alcatraz- is a positive step in that direction. If they're gonna treat us separately, then we'll remain separately"³⁶ Oakes addressed the issue of discrimination, living in the margins of society on reservations. Instead of being controlled and dependent on the American government, Oakes stressed the need for sovereignty. Assimilation was not the answer; in fact, assimilation went against the ideas of freedom and liberty that America was built upon.

Horse Capture described his experiences as an occupier and the potential the occupation held to inspire change. "[S]o the darkened world that I was born into is now a bright one," he said. "There is sunshine everywhere, and the pride, perseverance, and the reawakening of our ancient Indian culture all started on that rocky little island."³⁷ The "reawakening" that Horse Capture felt was passed down to future generations. The senses of unity and community created at Alcatraz countered threats to the survival of Native American cultures. The occupiers worked toward sovereignty and to building their own national identity.

Alcatraz also led to other movements that helped changed Native American discrimination in America. Historians Troy Johnson, Duane Champagne, and Joane Nagel argue in "American Indian Activism and Transformation" that Alcatraz sparked the greatest wave of modern-day American Indian activism, creating a movement for "social revitalization" that combated government policies that had banned religious ceremonies, such as the ghost dance.³⁸ The occupation also led to educating Native Americans about the

³⁴ Ibid, 68.

³⁵ Submissions to the San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, 22, December 1969, Al Miller Interview, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187796>

³⁶ Submissions to the San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, 24, November 1969, Alcatraz scenes, relief fund, Richard Oakes interview, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187780>

³⁷ Horse Capture, *From the Reservation to the Smithsonian Via Alcatraz*, 152.

³⁸ Troy Johnson, Duane Champagne, and Joane Nagel, "American Indian Activism and Transformation: Lessons from Alcatraz," *American Indian Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 10-11.

sense of unity that was possible in America. Various protest campaigns further educated Americans about government policies that had created such social and economic disparities on reserves, which spurred sympathy for Native Americans in cities. Organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), Society of American Indians (SAI), American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Alcatraz Red Power Movement (ARPM) worked together to protest many policies in the years after Alcatraz.³⁹ Protests like the Longest Walk, which was hosted by the ARPM, rallied several hundred Native Americans who marched towards Washington, D.C., to make a statement about the problems Alcatraz highlighted.⁴⁰ Though government policy was not directly changed because of Alcatraz, the perspectives of Native Americans changed. They found a united voice that allowed them to come together to protect the future generations from the oppression they faced.

Conclusion

The first occupiers of Alcatraz felt the pressures of assimilation and the fears of culture loss. They knew well the situations on reserves and the pressures to relocate. Living in poverty on the reserves and depending on the federal government, many younger individuals tried their luck by moving to cities. But moving into the cities posed another set of challenges. Separated from family support in the big cities and shunned because of their race, relocated Native Americans felt misplaced. Their culture was not widely accepted in American public and they were frequently ignored when they tried to change their fates by using the American political system. This sparked the protest into action. Widespread senses of cultural loss and suppression emerged at Alcatraz. Native Americans cherished the freedom of expression and sovereignty on the island. At Alcatraz, the occupiers formed new sense of community where they could freely express and learn about their cultural backgrounds without limitations. By clearly expressing their grievances to the public through the proclamation, they gained public support and understanding.

Deloria, Jr. criticized the occupation because it led to no government action. Alcatraz did affect Native American society in a broader way, however. The occupiers were able to learn and empower themselves by practicing Native American culture, which many believed could now be passed onto the younger population. Alcatraz provided an identity that unified protestors for years to come. More than a protest, it gave the Native American community a voice. Deloria, Jr. was right that occupiers "want[ed] change, but we do not know what change."⁴¹ But it was Alcatraz that helped Native Americans identify the change they wanted and how to achieve it. The occupation was part of the ongoing process of combating colonial policies, changing American minds, and sparking an era of resistance that would change Native American life over the next 25 years.

³⁹ Ibid, 12-13.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 37.

⁴¹ Deloria, Jr., *Alcatraz, Activism, And Accommodation*, 50-51.

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