AIM: The American Indian Movement from the 20th to the 21st Century

Deborah J. Shepherd

Origins

Identified in the public American eye largely as a protest movement but coming to stand as something much larger to its Indian participants, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968 in Minneapolis in response to brutal police actions against Native Americans. Some sources trace the movement back to the National Indian Youth Council formed in New Mexico in 1961 as part of the broader Civil Rights movement for minorities in the United States (Wittstock and Salinas c2006; Shreve 2011).

In the early 1960s, clashes between state governments and tribes came to a head over fishing rights. Early treaties had guaranteed fishing rights outside of existing reservations. In an effort to preserve their cultural heritage, tribes wished to recover their native patterns of subsistence and food production. Fishing with nets, traps, spears and other means were all native methods prohibited by state laws, which did not exclude Indians in contradiction to the old treaties (Hightower-Langston 2003:399-400). Governor Isaac Stevens of the Territory of Washington signed a treaty provision around 1854 that allowed the local tribes the right to fish in their accustomed places in common with settlers (Supreme Court of the United States 1968). For the Indians this meant that they could fish according to their own ways as part of the preservation of their cultural heritage. For 1960s law enforcement, cultural heritage had nothing to do with fishing rights, and use of unapproved methods resulted in arrests of native fishermen in Washington State (Chrisman 2008).

AIM in the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement took on the mantle of Red Power in direct emulation of Black Power and the Black Panther movement. Both minorities were struggling to achieve tumultuous cultural and political shifts. The initial focus of AIM on police harassment quickly expanded to include slum housing conditions, high unemployment, poor public education, and inadequate welfare...
assistance. AIM began with a clear urban stance on native rights but has since moved on to include the concerns of Indians living on reservations. Today AIM also works to help groups regain rights granted in U.S. government treaties (Hightower-Langston 2003:328).

**Urban Focus**
The influx of Native Americans to urban centers gained ground after World War II. At this time the federal government began pursuing “termination policy.” The name and the goals of this policy are confusing. In short, the federal government wanted to be free of obligations to tribes. One way to achieve this was for the federal government to dispose of tribal lands. The Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946 asked for final settlement of tribal land claims (Hightower-Langston 2003: 419). A federal commission recommended in 1949 that the government should end all federal programs for tribes. This did not happen. However, Public Law 280 was signed by Eisenhower in 1953 (ibid.). PL 280 affected some states but not others, initially California, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, and Wisconsin. Later, Alaska was added after it achieved statehood. In these states, federal control on tribal lands was transferred to state jurisdictions. The tribes retained less power than held previously. The end result was that greater lawlessness and violence in Indian country. Numerous studies have addressed this problem (Tribal Court [2012]; Goldberg [n.d.]).

Tribes that were terminated, or rather, lost federal governance and fell under state jurisdiction, generally suffered increased poverty and loss of land (Hightower-Langston 2003:420). Some men immigrated to cities in search of a livelihood. As their numbers grew and their poverty persisted, the urban Indian became both increasingly discontent and knowledgeable about the growing Civil Rights Movement. The urban Indian population was not stable or grounded in family life. These were mostly lone males. Although media history has often dramatized the struggles on reservations, the rise of Red Power occurred in the cities (D’Arcus 2010: 1241-1250; Oakland [2012]).

**Self-Determination and Rights**
During all this time, the symbol of oppression in the eyes of most native Americans was the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. which promoted and implemented much of the termination policy. The Bureau had been founded back in 1824 to oversee treaty negotiations, Indian schools, and Indian trade. Its other purpose was to move Indians away from lands desired by white settlers and frontier developers. The BIA was also supposed to deliver cash annuities to tribes, but widespread corruption meant that most monies were simply kept by officials rather than delivered. They were out beyond the edge of civilization. Who would complain?

Indians remained powerless against the BIA for many decades, but in early November 1972, inspired by AIM and their success with the occupation on Alcatraz (see below), Indians protesting years of treaty violations marched on Washington. Once there, police actions interpreted as threatening led the 2,000 protesters to barricade themselves within the BIA building. This action resulted in an allegedly unplanned seven-day occupation (Redhawk
In the 1970s, civil rights ideals had taken hold and for native Americans, termination policy was largely reversed. Termination was replaced by self-determination policy. The Indian Self-Determination act as well as the Education Assistance Act, both of 1975, allowed Indians “maximum participation” and involvement in federal programs and services (Hightower-Langston 2003: 380). Notably, since 1977, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has existed under the leadership of Native directors (http://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/index.htm).

Alcatraz

It is not possible in this short space to cover all the newsworthy protests conducted by AIM. For the purposes of this article, only the Alcatraz occupation and Wounded Knee II will be covered.

Alcatraz, an island out in San Francisco Bay, was occupied and utilized by Native Americans long before European contact. It once was as a place of isolation and food gathering. Later, it also became a hideout from the Spanish Catholic Mission system of combined religious and military outposts. Starting in 1850, the U.S. Army took control of the island and began constructing a military fort. During the Civil War, some Confederate prisoners were incarcerated. The fort also served as a prison for Indians beginning in 1873 after six Modoc tribe members were charged with killing two army officers. The cells were formally converted to a military prison in 1907 (ITVS and PBS 2002).

Prohibition led to increased law enforcement and need for more secure prisons for bootleggers and their associates. A maximum-security facility was created on Alcatraz in 1934 and stayed in operation until 1963 when it was emptied and declared federal surplus land. Native American groups immediately began planning a reoccupation. In 1964, the first attempt lasted only a few hours but made the point that an 1868 treaty had granted Indians the right to occupy federal surplus land. A second effort likewise was short lived after the Coast Guard stepped in and threatened arrests. A third effort, in November 1969, thwarted the Coast Guard and landed seventy-nine Indians who maintained a well-organized occupation that lasted for nineteen months, under the charismatic leader Richard Oakes and others with AIM affiliation (Hightower-Langston 2003:325; Locke 1999). In the end, Oakes left when his teenaged stepdaughter died in a stairwell fall, and in-fighting for control weakened the collective resolve (Johnston [n.d.]; Locke 1999; Vercillo [n.d.]). However, the nineteen-month duration left an impression of strength and mission on many Indians and non-Indians alike. It was perhaps the first time that many non-Indians began to think about what the protests were about.
**Wounded Knee II**

Wounded Knee II turned out to be a much more violent and angry confrontation that most often did not receive much empathy from the mainstream media at the time. A striking exception was coverage from the African-American magazine, *Ebony*. In 1973, black artist Paul Collins submitted photographs, art and text explaining the conflict from a native point of view and drawing clear comparisons to black experience in America.

The first Wounded Knee event occurred on December 29, 1890 when some 300 Sioux men, women, and children were massacred by the U.S. Seventh Calvary. The Sioux were unarmed, and no resistance had been offered or threat expected. As many anthropology textbooks tell, the massacre had been prompted by fear and misunderstanding of the ritual Ghost Dance and its associated beliefs. This ritual had been recently created by a Paiute holy man named Wovoka who taught it as an invocation for a future time when all Indians would be reunited in a life of tranquility (Hightower-Langston 2003:100-101). Wovoka’s followers supported peace and held that the oppressive white rule would be removed by the spirit powers *without the use of war*. White authorities, however, interpreted the religious beliefs simplistically and held that the performance of the dance was literal preparation for a military assault. This was obviously how the prediction of white rule removal would come true. In December of 1890 the U.S. authorities banned the Ghost Dance on all Lakota Sioux reservations. When performance of the ghost dance continued that same month because natives living under widespread conditions of disease and starvation found Wovoka’s teachings comforting, the soldiers were ordered to annihilate the offending populations (Hightower-Langston 2003: 431-432).

In 1973, the massacre site was part of Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, among the poorest of all Native American reservations with, at that time, fifty-four percent unemployment, and rampant poverty. Two hundred natives, mostly young men, in an effort to make the nation see how desperate life at Pine Ridge on the edge of the Badlands was and also to protest the policies of their own tribal chairman, occupied the village of Wounded Knee (Scott 2008:25-26). The FBI arrived, and two occupiers were killed during the seventy-one day long standoff, but many more Indians died or were wounded subsequently during the continuing struggle with the tribal government. Many of the original occupiers were AIM supporters, and AIM continued to champion the rights of the residents against their government. At this time, the FBI saw AIM as the enemy and worked to infiltrate and destroy the organization. AIM’s chief security officer was discovered to be working for the FBI (Cannon 2003). Understandably, many have said that fear and mistrust grew within the AIM organization. In June of 1975, two FBI agents were killed, and an AIM leader, Leonard Peltier, was convicted and given two consecutive life sentences for the murders (*ibid.*).

In December 1975, Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, a young AIM activist and mother of two was murdered with a gunshot to the back of the head. Her body was exposed out on the desert and not found for some
weeks by which time early forensic science could recover only limited information. The question of whether her murder could be traced back to the FBI or to certain AIM members is still in court (Cannon 2003; Mihesuah 2000; see also the John Graham Defense Committee, http://www.grahamdefense.org/). The years after Wounded Knee II were a time of great anger and mobilization on the part of Indian activists as well as a time of intensive investigation and repression of protest by the FBI and other legal authorities (D’Arcus 2003:718-726). The now-published catalog of the FBI microfilm files on AIM and Wounded Knee describes clashes and information-gathering efforts on many thousands of pages (Dewing and Schipper 1986). The situation had become a war.

**Evolving AIM Initiatives**

After the violence of the mid-1970s, both sides slowly struggled to work more effectively together. Native American groups learned how to control their representation in the media so that stories were no longer so one sided (Heppler 2009:68). AIM started many youth, education and housing initiatives as well as continuing its focus on recovering and protecting treaty rights (e.g., Mihesuah 2000; Krouse 2003). One further AIM goal, however, required that “Indian religious freedom and cultural integrity [be] protected.” (Wittstock and Salinas c2006). The National American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) was a major achievement in this direction.

**NAGPRA**

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### Some Additional Resources

- **Banks, Dennis, with Richard Erdoes**

- **D’Arcus, Bruce**

- **Hoxie, Frederick E.**

- **Public Broadcasting Corporation**

- **Shreve, Bradley G.**

- **Thompson, William Norman**
NAGPRA allowed federally recognized Native American nations the right to retrieve the remains of their ancestors from museums and other research institutions. These remains could then be buried with correct ritual and reverence. As for many other human societies, the respectful treatment of dead ancestors is fundamental in Indian spiritual life. Furthermore, NAGPRA allowed that cultural artifacts with sacred and ritual connections could also be reclaimed. Such spiritual items as prayer sticks and ritual masks were no longer to be kept in museum cabinets (Shepherd 2012, in preparation). Certainly, there were restrictions within and later clarifications of the law. First, the law only applies to tribes that have legal recognition from the federal government. Not all tribes have federal recognition or necessarily want it (Indianz.com 2011). Second, tribes had to be identified as the real descendents of the makers of specific artifacts or related to specific human remains in order to lay claim to them. Anthropologists, archaeologists, geologists, and Indians frequently have been in conflict over the verification of cultural connections. The scientists argued from their research in the laboratory and field whereas the Indians brought their origin stories and teachings of elders to court (ibid.). Settling questions of cultural relationships, especially over periods of many centuries, is often a task made difficult by past native migrations.

AIM and Native Americans
It is important to realize that AIM takes strong political stands and is not supported in every way by all tribes or Indians. Like other indigenous group movements around the world, AIM seeks to establish legal powers of sovereignty for individual tribes holding treaties and for American natives collectively. Sovereignty is a key issue for gaining bargaining power with the federal government on a host of smaller issues from fishing rights to Indian preference in HUD housing programs (Wittstock and Salinas c2006). From an outside perspective, and probably internally as well, AIM seeks to prevent Indian cultural and physical assimilation for the security and wellbeing of those many natives who do not desire such assimilation (Rich 2004:82; Scott 2008: 45-46). Many in the Indian community, whether or not they are part of AIM, believe that problems of unemployment, poverty, addiction, and crime are due to loss of Indian culture.

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