

Through advocacy that won the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, activists succeeded in having tribal adoption and foster care agencies oversee the placement of Indigenous children.

Protests in the streets, litigation in courts, and the lobbying of Congress led to a continued rise in Indigenous political power. In 1996, Elouise Cobell filed suit over the federal government's failure to abide by its treaties and agreements, in this case regarding the use of trust funds for five hundred thousand Indigenous people. In 2009, after years of litigation, the celebrated case of *Cobell v. Salazar* was finally resolved. The settlement with Indigenous tribes included the creation of a scholarship fund to give more Native Americans access to higher education. This was an excellent challenge to racial policies dating back centuries. Indigenous protests were an important part of the waves of demonstrations taking place during the Vietnam War, era when there were not only demonstrations against the war but also for women's, immigrant, and civil rights, as well as the urban uprisings that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The arts gave expression to the pain and rage.

OCCUPYING ALCATRAZ

The former prison of Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay became the focus of a struggle over Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination between 1969 and 1971. Richard Oakes, an Akwesasne Mohawk activist and the director of Indian Studies at San Francisco State, and a group of Indigenous students took a boat to the island and for nineteen months occupied the notorious former prison, demanding its return to Indigenous people.⁷⁴ Alcatraz Island, commonly known as "The Rock" but also by its Spanish name La Isla de Los Alcatraces (Island of the Pelicans), is located about a mile and a half from the shore of San Francisco.⁷⁵ It was symbolically important to the nearly one hundred Indigenous women and men who began their occupation of the site on November 20, 1969.⁷⁶ Demanding the return of the island by "right of discovery," the occupiers created a news frenzy and struck against the image of Indigenous victimization, reigniting an international struggle over appropriated lands, the recognition of treaties, and Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.⁷⁷

Oakes and his fellow occupiers, including members of the activist group the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968,

called themselves "Indians of All Tribes." They demanded the return of Alcatraz Island for the creation of a Native American university and cultural outpost.⁷⁸ "We Are Indians of All Tribes! WE HOLD THE ROCK!" they declared in their proclamation.⁷⁹ At the protest's height, more than fifty tribes and nearly six hundred activists were engaged. The occupation drew international attention to the poverty on reservations and their substandard healthcare and poor sanitation and water quality. They pointed to "the Rock," an abandoned, fetid federal prison, as a useful point of comparison for the conditions that millions faced on reservations.⁸⁰

In January 1970, Oakes's stepdaughter tragically fell to her death from a stairway in the prison. Oakes left Alcatraz, and his departure, along with internal struggles in the group, signaled that what had been a successful movement of "Indians of All Tribes" had turned into a cause collapsing under the weight of personality clashes, drug use, competing agendas, and, possibly, spies planted by President Richard Nixon's administration to foment turmoil, which would be in keeping with the government's age-old divide-and-conquer strategy.⁸¹ Nixon had feigned patience, fearful of losing votes when the movement was well supported, but when the occupation lost popularity, the government disconnected the island's electricity and telephone lines, cut off its water supply, and sent in officers to arrest the remaining occupiers.⁸²

Nonetheless, the Alcatraz protest spurred other demonstrations and occupy movements to reclaim Indigenous lands in Northern California, Alaska, New Mexico, and at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, as well as at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior headquarters in Washington, DC. This resulted in the hiring of Indigenous people by the BIA, which oversees the administration of tribal lands, law enforcement, economic development, governance, and natural resources.⁸³ Later, the National Park Service would admit that although "the Trail of Broken Treaties did not accomplish all that its organizers had hoped, it would be a mistake to call the demonstration a failure. Though Nixon's task force initially rejected the demands set forth by protesters in the Twenty Points, many of these objectives were later incorporated into American Indian policy in the coming years, setting a new course for self-determination and tribal recognition, a reversal of the disastrous policies of the past."⁸⁴

A REBELLION AT WOUNDED KNEE

Nearly a century after the massacre at Wounded Knee, ten of the twenty poorest counties in the United States were reservations in the Lakota and Dakota territories.⁸⁵ In 1973, hundreds of members of the Sioux Nation led an uprising to protest the squalid conditions on the reservation at Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwestern South Dakota.⁸⁶ As highlighted earlier, Wounded Knee was the notorious site of the 1890 battle between the Sioux Nation and the US military that left 30 soldiers and 166 Indigenous men, women, and children dead. It was the final formal battle between the Indigenous and federal troops.

Two vocal AIM members, Dennis Banks and Leonard Peltier, charged the Pine Ridge administration with corruption and led a protest against the conditions on the reservation and the non-Indian police's treatment of residents. They chose Wounded Knee as the site of their protest because of its historic and symbolic significance. On February 27, 1973, gunfire was exchanged between AIM and federal officers. Seventy-three days later, the protest ended. Officially, two Native Americans were killed, and a federal marshal was permanently paralyzed by a bullet wound. Hundreds of arrests were made. The leaders of AIM surrendered and were acquitted at trial. AIM's protest had drawn national and mainstream attention to the horrific conditions on Pine Ridge and other reservations.

In 1975, there was another outbreak of violence between AIM and the administrators of Pine Ridge's reservation, resulting in assaults and murders, with more than one hundred dead. After an exchange of gunfire, two FBI agents lay dead. Leonard Peltier was convicted and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. To date, Peltier has been imprisoned for nearly fifty years, his appeals denied, and he is considered by many a political prisoner.

CASINO OWNERSHIP AS DEFIANCE

There is progress despite the poverty on most reservations. In 2021, American Indians and Alaska Natives had the highest poverty rate of any US ethnic group, with poverty at around 22 percent, while the national poverty rate was 13 percent.⁸⁷ However, the reservation has political, cultural, emotional, historical power (and economic power