

**DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE UNIT: RESOURCE SET 4: INTRODUCTION****AMERICAN INDIAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT INTRODUCTION**

Left: Protestors share a meal during the 1969-71 occupation of Alcatraz Island.<sup>1</sup>

Right: Dick Wilson and his militia.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950's, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began an **urban** relocation program for American Indians.<sup>3</sup> They offered money to any American Indian person who would leave their reservation and move to a U.S. city. Many people moved to cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Sometimes the government did not give them the money they were promised. Urban relocation caused many American Indians to experience unemployment, discrimination, homesickness, and other hardships.

During the 1960's, people in America were protesting for civil rights, peace, and equality. For example, many people protested against the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement fought to end segregation and Jim Crow laws.

Several American Indian civil rights groups were formed during the 1960's, including the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Indians of All Tribes (IOAT). These groups used non-violent and violent strategies to fight for a better life. The American Indian activists of this era became known as the "Red Power Movement."

<sup>1</sup> <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/alcatraz-occupation-four-decades-ago-led-to-many-benefits-for-american-indians-ExAxf1i9PkWAY-DJylshzA>

<sup>2</sup> <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/alcatraz-occupation-four-decades-ago-led-to-many-benefits-for-american-indians-ExAxf1i9PkWAY-DJylshzA>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/indian-relocation.html>

### Alcatraz Occupation

In 1969, a group of 89 American Indian activists rode on boats to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. There was an abandoned federal prison on the island, and the activists began to **decolonize** Alcatraz by painting over signs and using traditional symbols to mark it as American Indian territory.<sup>4</sup> The group of protestors called themselves the Indians of All Tribes (IOAT). The protestors lived in the abandoned prison for two years. Every day, boats would bring supplies and fresh water. Many of the protestors were student activists from the University of California, Berkeley. The protest inspired many activists to organize in their cities, and fight for their rights.

### American Indian Movement

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed in response to the discrimination that American Indian people were experiencing in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. The members of AIM supported their local communities by giving people rides to work, giving food to the needy, and raising money.<sup>5</sup> AIM also followed the police to make sure they didn't harass the American Indian community.

During the 1960's, AIM gave the people something to believe in and made them proud to be Native. They talked about American Indian land rights, the freedom of religion, and the need to reestablish traditional culture. The AIM leaders wanted people to stop being dependent on the government and to "stand on their own two feet."<sup>6</sup> Some American Indian people have criticized the male AIM leaders for being disrespectful to women, and for their use of violence to achieve their goals.<sup>7</sup> AIM continues to be known as a controversial group today.

### Wounded Knee Occupation

In 1973, the Oglala Sioux elders of the Pine Ridge Reservation were facing many problems. The reservation law enforcement was often violent, and there was widespread poverty. Many tribal members believed that Dick Wilson, the chairman of the reservation, was being abusive. Elders from the tribe called on leaders from AIM to help **mediate** the conflict with Wilson. AIM leaders saw this as an opportunity to help their fellow people, and to draw attention to larger problems between American Indians and the U.S. government.

AIM and the Pine Ridge elders wanted Wilson to be fired. They also demanded that the U.S. government renegotiate its treaties with the Oglala Sioux nation. Many reporters came to Wounded Knee, and the story received national attention. The problems between

<sup>4</sup> Biggs, L. (2019). "A Tribe Is an Island:" Placemaking, Protest, and the Alcatraz Occupation. *Journal of Politics & Society*, 30(1), 30 - 46.

<sup>5</sup> Shreve, B. (2015). Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities. *Tribal College*, 27(1), 59.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wm.edu/as/anthropology/research/centers/airc/OurWork/podcast/aim/index.php>

<sup>7</sup> Pettit, A. (2015). A Legacy of Furious Men. *Studies In American Indian Literatures*, 27(2), 29 - 61.

AIM and Wilson quickly turned into an armed standoff. The federal government sent the FBI, helicopters, snipers, and armored vehicles to confront the armed AIM protestors.<sup>8</sup>

The two sides exchanged gunfire for many days. Two American Indian men were killed, and one U.S. Marshall was badly injured. After the deaths, both sides agreed to end the standoff. AIM leaders met with a representative from the government to discuss treaties, but the meetings did not fix the problems at Pine Ridge. In the three years after the standoff, more than 60 people were murdered on Pine Ridge Reservation. They were all opponents of Dick Wilson, and many of the deaths were not investigated.<sup>9</sup> The Wounded Knee Occupation did not create the change that AIM had hoped for, but the event did succeed in bringing media attention to the struggles of American Indian communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Record, I., & Hocker, A. P. (1998). A Fire that Burns: The Legacy of Wounded Knee. *Native Americas*, 15(1), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Churchill, W., & Vander Wall, J. (2002). *Agents of repression: The FBI's secret wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Vol. 7). South End Press