

[Back to index](#)

## "14 Little Indians" A Critical Examination of the Public Reaction to the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz

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The 1960s were a tumultuous time for liberal populist movements in the United States. Most striking was the Black Civil Rights movement that made headlines throughout the decade. Yet clearly, African Americans were not the only minority protesting the *status quo* and mainstream politics in the U.S. In the words of Ted Kennedy, Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, by 1970 "Indians have begun to adopt the confrontation tactics that have marked the dramatic emergence of other minorities in this decade."<sup>[i]</sup> Specifically, from November of 1969 through June of 1971, Native Americans occupied the infamous Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay. For 19 months, between fourteen and over 200 Indians lived in protest of the American government on "The Rock."

The drastic step of seizing Alcatraz is clearly one of those strategies that mirrored "the dramatic emergence of other minorities," as Ted Kennedy described. However, the severity of their action was not reflected in the reaction of the public to it. This study examines how the media and other groups viewed this situation, and how the Indians reacted to these attitudes. Examination of documents from major newspaper indicates that the early part of this occupation was taken lightly by the public and its media, by "activist" entertainers looking to profit from it, and, ironically, by the Indians themselves in certain public statements. As the situation became tenser, the media became factual reporters, the entertainers choose to ignore it entirely, and the Indians just got mad.

Early in the morning of November 20, 1969, Alcatraz caretaker Glenn Dodson awoke to the sound of invaders. As he put it, "there were Indians all over the place." Instead of securing the island, however, Dodson invited the Indians in for a hot drink and told them he was one-eighth Cherokee himself.<sup>[ii]</sup> And with that, a band of fourteen Indians had seized Alcatraz, the island that housed one of the most famous prisons in the United States. This was actually the third attempt to take the island, with previous attempts on March 9, 1964 and November 9, 1969, forcefully thwarted by government officials.<sup>[iii]</sup> But on November 20, 1969 they finally were successful, and had claimed Alcatraz as per their "right of discovery"<sup>[iv]</sup> and an antiquated 1868 Century Sioux treaty with the federal government.<sup>[v]</sup> The following day, this group of predominantly young American Indians<sup>[vi]</sup> held a ceremony to celebrate their conquest and foray into the civil rights debate.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Their time on "the rock" was, for lack of a better term, "rocky." While they were proud of their protest's practical significance, the Indians recognized its greater role as a symbolic gesture and victory.<sup>[viii]</sup> They most certainly increased cultural awareness for their cause, and received explicit support from a group of Berkeley students,<sup>[ix]</sup> the American Jewish Council,<sup>[x]</sup> the Episcopal Diocese of California,<sup>[xi]</sup> and "Local 10" of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union.<sup>[xii]</sup> Further, this event actually helped to define a true Indian community, coordinating previously unassociated members of a myriad of tribes in hopes of creating a united "Confederation of American Indian Nations."<sup>[xiii]</sup> Throughout their occupation, the Indians engaged in "on and off" negotiations with government officials over the use and ownership of the island,<sup>[xiv]</sup> none of which was ever successful. Independent of the negotiations, the Indians faced a series of physical and emotional hardships. For example, Mohawk leader Richard Oakes' daughter died in a fall on the island<sup>[xv]</sup> and a major fire ravaged many of the island's structures.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

To compound the problems created by simply living on the island, the government made the situation more difficult and, ultimately, ended the occupation. The federal government chose to almost whimsically

set up a blockade around the island, and just as whimsically to remove it.<sup>[xviii]</sup> The government then snipped phone lines,<sup>[xviii]</sup> stopped deliveries of water, and cut off power supply to the island.<sup>[xix]</sup> But, the government's major involvement was what was dubbed the "recapture of Alcatraz." Thirty-five Armed Federal Marshals formed a "protective force" and physically reclaimed the island and removed its fifteen remaining inhabitants.<sup>[xx]</sup> Delbert Lee, one of those fifteen, posed the simple question to a group of reporters, "Why guns?"<sup>[xxi]</sup> Some asked an even more general question, "why at all?" The government posited explanations ranging from stolen copper<sup>[xxii]</sup> to the Department of Transportation's navigation concerns<sup>[xxiii]</sup> to the Department of the Interior's desire to continue work on its proposed park.<sup>[xxiv]</sup> No matter the reason, the Indians were off the island and the protest was ended.

Even given the seriousness of their protest, people just did not seem to take the Indians seriously. The general attitude through which the public viewed the early portion of the occupation was one of levity. It was said that Americans viewed Indians merely as "glib reflections of movie screen stereotypes"<sup>[xxv]</sup> and their invasion was the true-life personification of "the mouse that roared."<sup>[xxvi]</sup> For example, the most repeated account at any point throughout this ordeal was the camp tale told by federal caretaker Glenn Dodson discussed earlier. Further, instead of latching on to the heart-wrenching tales of oppression, the national media felt the "reverse Thanksgiving"<sup>[xxvii]</sup> was a far more interesting topic of discussion. During one cultural event, an onlooker encapsulated America's view of these people by remarking "how charming those Indian Costumes are."<sup>[xxviii]</sup> In short, the problem may be that "most Americans know the first Americans only by cliché."<sup>[xxix]</sup> One author noted the dominant (and clearly inaccurate) images of Indians that dominate the popular mindset:

There is the 19<sup>th</sup> century image, caught in bronze and in lithograph, of the defeated warrior, head drooping forward so that his feathers nearly mingle with his pony's mane. The bow of his shoulders and the slump of his body evoke his loss of pride, of green and fertile lands, of earth's most favored continent. Then there is a recent image, often seen through air-conditioned automobile windows. Grinning shyly, the fat squaw hawks her woven baskets along the reservation highway, the dusty landscape littered with rusty cars, crumbling wickiups and bony cattle.<sup>[xxx]</sup>

The combination of ignorance and flippancy is evident in the diction employed by mainstream media. For example, Indians are frequently referred to as "redmen,"<sup>[xxxi]</sup> "braves and squaws," and "redskins."<sup>[xxxii]</sup> Further, terms such as "war party,"<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> "victory powwow,"<sup>[xxxiv]</sup> and, on Thanksgiving, "pilgrimage,"<sup>[xxxv]</sup> were bantered about by the print media. While members of the media did not take such liberties with other civil rights movements, they did in this case, reinforcing the existing stereotypes. It seems that only in reference to the Indian movement would the media have the gall to describe the protesters as "Geronimos and Crazy Horses in Levis"<sup>[xxxvi]</sup> and to summarize the struggle as "how the west was won."<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> The media does not stop there, though. When discussing Indians, newspaper columnists begin to stereotype other persons too, reminding the reader that the Indians have to deal with the "Pale Faces"<sup>[xxxviii]</sup> and the "Great White Father."<sup>[xxxix]</sup> It is no surprise that such a media would unwittingly describe one conference as a "powwow on the dual sense of justice."<sup>[xl]</sup>

Celebrities and quasi-celebrities also took an interest in the Indians. But once again, their attention was not of a serious nature. Here, the celebrities looked to increase their renown by capitalizing on a popular crisis. For example, Ralph Nelson's film crew donated twenty-eight teepees to the Alcatraz Indians.<sup>[xli]</sup> Not only was this evidence of blatant stereotyping, it was clearly a publicity stunt as makeshift teepees would not be useful against the biting cold of an Alcatraz winter. But no example is more poignant than Anthony Quinn's sojourn to Alcatraz in December of 1969. While it was a pleasant gesture of his to support their cause, it is no surprise that it coincided with the release of his new movie, incidentally named *Nobody Loves a Drunken Indian*.<sup>[xlii]</sup> Similarly, actress Jane Fonda led a raid on the California State Assembly to urge the passage of a bill supporting the Indians, which proceeded to pass without her assistance. But, as one reporter alluded to, at least her name ended up in the paper.<sup>[xliii]</sup> Other examples include sculptor Beniamino Bufano's support of the Indians (and his desire to be commissioned to sculpt a monument of them)<sup>[xliv]</sup> and Malvina Reynolds authorship of the song "Alcatraz (Pelican Island)."<sup>[xlv]</sup>

Further, many celebrities such as Comedian Jonathan Winters,<sup>[xlvi]</sup> folk singer Buffy Saint-Marie,<sup>[xlvii]</sup> and twenty-one San Franciscan poets<sup>[xlviii]</sup> found the best way for them to help was to discuss (but never actually follow through on) benefit events for the Indians.

Even the Indians, who were the engineers of the protest and targets of centuries of abuse, fell into the pattern of humor. As one author remarked, "the Indian is spicing his protest with a grim kind of humor."<sup>[lix]</sup> For example, the Indians started the World War II parody "Radio Free Alcatraz"<sup>[li]</sup> and wrote their deed to Alcatraz not on legal paper or parchment, but on a large piece of cow hide.<sup>[lii]</sup> Further, just as mainstream media took to calling them "redskins," they did not refrain from mentioning that "some dumb honky" landed on North America and mistook it for India (hence the moniker Indian).<sup>[liii]</sup> The Indians also engaged in what was described as "good natured ribbing of the federal government."<sup>[liiii]</sup> For example, their organization that dealt with the media was mockingly dubbed the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs, in reference to the ineffectual Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>[liv]</sup> When asked to comment on the government's proposal for a National Park with "an Indian flavor," the Indian spokesman stated, "if I know the government, it means the park would have Indian janitors."<sup>[lv]</sup> One final example involves the federal government's charge that the Indians were hoarding weapons on the island in August of 1970. In the milieu of "good natured ribbing," the Indians tossed their entire stock of "weapons" into the sea, consisting of a bow and two water pistols.<sup>[lvi]</sup>

As the effects of time wore on the Indians, their situation became less of a laughing matter. Almost immediately upon arrival, the already dilapidated conditions began to degrade to the point of tragedy. By 1971, the gasoline generator was dead, one of the four living cottages was torn down and used for fire wood, the supply boat only traveled sporadically, and the Native Americans on the island had become "intense" and "discouraged." Internal conflict arose as well. Issues of disunity, bickering among the leadership, and questions of the overall success of the mission detracted from the focus of this protest.<sup>[lvii]</sup> Things were certainly not at their best. Some of the most egregious examples of poor conditions only became public after the federal government returned to the island. Shortly after the "recapturing" of the island, newsmen were given "a tour that was more like an autopsy, [that revealed] an unrelieved vista of squalor, filth, systematic pilfering and mindless destruction."<sup>[lviii]</sup>

External conflicts also plagued the Indians. The government slowly encroached on the rights of the protesters on Alcatraz. Phone lines were snipped, water supplies stopped, power supplies cut, and federal caretakers removed. Two major incidents ended in classic "blame game" scenarios, where the government and the Indians each blamed the other party for a devastating fire<sup>[lix]</sup> and the shutting-off of the famous lighthouse.<sup>[lxi]</sup> A further external threat was levied by the Hartford Insurance Group that cut the insurance on the Indians' supply boat in June 1970.<sup>[lxii]</sup> In response to the general heightening of tensions, the Indians increased their boldness toward the outside world. Indian attacks grew to the point where the federal government was forced to call in the Federal Bureau of Investigation to study the incident.<sup>[lxiii]</sup> In short, grave tensions were mounting.

As a result of these transgressions, the entire mood of the Alcatraz protest changed. No incident better encapsulated both the changes in conditions and attitude than the story of Yvonne Oakes, twelve-year-old daughter of Indian leader Richard Oakes. On January 6, 1970, Yvonne fell down three flights of stairs in an island building and taken to a mainland hospital for emergency brain surgery. On January 8, she died in the Public Health Service Hospital in San Francisco, California. This incident was the culmination of a series of increasing frequent accidents on the island. Not surprisingly, Richard Oakes, one of the most devoted and jocular Indians, changed his tune, saying "I don't know what I'll do . . . my wife doesn't want to go back there: I just don't know."<sup>[lxiiii]</sup> And he was not alone – the tide of discontent was rising.

The media joined in this tone of gravity. "Redskins" were now "Indians," "powwows" were "meetings," and the "Great White Father" was the "Government Service Agency."<sup>[lxiv]</sup> Public reaction to events reflected this new found attitude. In comparing Indian assaults on tourist from August 1970 to March 1971, boat driver Albert Elledge stated "that [first] incident was somewhat of a joke . . . but now its getting serious."<sup>[lxv]</sup> After the middle of 1970, journalists recognized the seriousness of the protest (or at least no longer saw its humor) and began to report the stories factually. For example, it was not until March 1971

that accurate reports about the poor conditions on Alcatraz were published.<sup>[lxvii]</sup> While this trend toward factual reporting was refreshing, it also meant a major decline in the total press afforded to the Indians. For example, no article about the Indians on Alcatraz appeared in any of the more than 150 periodicals listed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*<sup>[lxviii]</sup> within a two-month radius of their June 1971 removal by armed federal marshals.<sup>[lxviii]</sup> Reports in East Coast periodicals all but disappeared, save one paragraph on page fourteen for the death of Yvonne Oakes in the *New York Times*,<sup>[lxix]</sup> and only a single UPI story for the recapturing of Alcatraz.<sup>[lxx]</sup> Even the home newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, did not print an editorial on the Indians between December 2, 1969, and June 17, 1971.

Celebrity involvement also changed with the times. First, save Jane Fonda's splash in Sacramento, no celebrity visited or campaigned publicly for Alcatraz Indians after December 18, 1969, less than one month after the initial landing. Clearly, celebrities lost interest, and lost interest quickly. Perhaps this is a function of the mainstream media's disinterest with the story. Without the publicity of a big newspaper, why would an entertainer go out his way to visit Alcatraz if the only reason he would do it was the press in the first place? Or, it is possible that celebrities or their advisers realized the situation became too tense to be made light of anymore. Another interesting phenomenon is that of the benefit concerts. While many semi-popular entertainers claimed they would participate in benefits for the Indians, the only assistance of this sort that actually reached the Indians was \$2000 raised by a First Unitarian Church benefit that paid for repairs on the island's generator.<sup>[lxxi]</sup>

While it is impossible to discern whether the Indians' lack of humor caused the media to become more serious or vice-versa, it is clear that a definite dampening of Indian spirits was emerging in their public statements and actions. One lucid example of this is the Indians' treatment of Thanksgiving. In 1969, the day was marked by a joyous, yet mocking, celebration.<sup>[lxxii]</sup> In 1970, however, the Indians explicitly shunned the day entirely.<sup>[lxxiii]</sup> This small transition is evidence of the changing attitude of the protesting Indians, shifting from a fun excursion to a draining experience. Another example of changing sentiments is the use of violence by the Indians. They began peacefully, but by August of 1970, peace gave way to symbolic violence. On the eleventh an Indian fired a warning arrow at a tourist ship.<sup>[lxxiv]</sup> If that was not enough, on the seventeenth an Indian hurled an unidentified fiery object at a second ship.<sup>[lxxv]</sup> Even then, the government stayed uninvolved in this issue. But, in March 1971, a flurry of steel nuts was enough to involve the F.B.I. The protesters were no longer the quaint "14 Little Indians"<sup>[lxxvi]</sup> – they meant business.

The Indians' seriousness intensified further during and after their removal from the island. For the first time on the day of their removal, the band of protesters was characterized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as "angry." The Indians vehemently berated the government not for its generally poor treatment of Native Americans, but for specific uses of force in their removal.<sup>[lxxvii]</sup> Further, the Indians accused the government of double-talk in its promises to negotiate for the future of the island.<sup>[lxxviii]</sup> Yet the Alcatraz protest was not an isolated incident. In fact, it spawned a variety of other Indian actions. For example, 100 Indians occupied a government missile site beginning just days after the recapturing of Alcatraz. This protest was similar to Alcatraz in nature, continuing its trend toward the more serious and militant.<sup>[lxxix]</sup> It was the heritage of Alcatraz that gave future Indian action the inspiration to further the movement.

During a woefully overlooked period of history, young Native Americans occupied Alcatraz island for nineteen months in protest of the American government's historical and current mistreatment of their people. Yet, even given the serious nature of their cause and action, they were just not taken as seriously as other civil rights and student movements. In the early days, celebrities flocked to an island portrayed as just another stereotype by mainstream media while the Indians continued to carry on a "dignified yet humorous protest."<sup>[lxxx]</sup> As time wore on, the situation on the island became more bleak, the patience of everyone involved wore thin. The media no longer saw the draw of a fun and camp storyline, and the celebrities lacked the motivation to participate. All that left was an Indian population increasing, ignored and angry, and a government increasingly less tolerant of their protest. And, in the end, the government just decided to end it for good, and these brave men and women just faded away as America no longer cared to notice them, leaving behind a legacy of a serious protest and its chuckling public.

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