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AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 18:4 (1994) 1–8

Introduction

JOANE NAGEL AND TROY JOHNSON

This issue of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. The nineteen-month occupation began on 20 November 1969 and ended on 11 June 1971. During that year-and-a-half, Native Americans from all over the United States and delegations from around the world visited the island and contributed their resources and good-will to the real and symbolic struggle of the occupation. The spirit of Alcatraz represented both challenge and resistance: challenge to prevailing images of Native Americans as the fading victims of history; resistance to the policies and treatment of Indian individuals and communities in the past and, most important, in the present.

As the voices we have invited to speak in this issue tell us, the spirit of Alcatraz has had an important and powerful legacy. What happened in those few months on that small island influenced and reshaped the lives of many native people; they, in turn, acted on that influence, thus reshaping the lives of many others, and so the circle continued. In this way, the ripples that began on Alcatraz Island spread out, washing on the beaches of many lives and many communities, ultimately contributing to the tidal wave of reform that swept across federal Indian policy and launched the self-determination era.

The seventeen papers in this issue speak to several aspects of the Alcatraz occupation: (1) the occupation itself—how it hap-

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pened, what occurred on the island, the U.S. government's response, why the events there took the course they did; (2) the aftermath and consequences of the occupation—the patterns of American Indian protest after 1969, the impact on federal Indian policy, the responses of individual Native Americans respond, the effect on both reservation and urban Indian communities. Diverse voices are represented in these pages, offering different assessments of the Alcatraz occupation—its meaning and its consequences. What is shared by all of the authors contributing to this volume, native and nonnative alike, is that they grasped the importance of what was happening on "the Rock" twenty-five years ago and they knew these events would change the way we view ourselves and one another.

The papers divide roughly into two sections: detailed accounts and personal reminiscences of various aspects of the occupation, and longer-term analyses of the meaning and consequences of the occupation. Some of these authors were directly involved in the occupation, others visited the island during the months of occupation, and still others witnessed what happened from a distance. Many of these stories are told here for the first time.

The first twelve papers provide background, insight, and reflections on the details of events during the nineteen months that "Indians of All Tribes" occupied Alcatraz Island. "Remembering Alcatraz: After Twenty-Five Years," by Troy Johnson and Joane Nagel, is a brief history of the Alcatraz occupation and the ten-year period of activism, sometimes called "Red Power," that followed the landing on the island. The paper also provides a preview of the impact of the Alcatraz occupation on the lives of several Native Americans, some of whom are contributors to this issue. Johnson and Nagel acknowledge that other Native American protest events of the 1960s and 1970s—the fish-ins in the Pacific Northwest during the mid-1960s or the siege at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973—may have more prominence in the minds of Americans, but they argue that the symbolic importance of the Alcatraz occupation as the launching pad of a decade of American Indian protest must not be underestimated.

In "Alcatraz, Activism, and Accommodation," veteran leader, scholar, and activist Vine Deloria, Jr., reflects on the place of Alcatraz in our collective memory, as well as its impact on the lives of native people and the federal policies that govern many aspects of those lives. Deloria places the occupation in the historical context of the civil rights movement, in particular the Poor

People's March of 1968. He notes the disjuncture between such legal bases of change as the Treaty of Medicine Creek and the actions of activists, but he also affirms the symbolic importance of prominent activist events such as the Alcatraz occupation. Deloria's article recounts his personal involvement in the occupation and provides an insightful and often critical analysis of the events on the island. In his conclusion, he points out the burden that the occupation imposed on those who embraced its symbolism—that self-determination is a responsibility as well as a right.

Adam Fortunate Eagle, in "Alcatraz! Alcatraz!" which was taken from his book of the same title, provides an insightful look into the Bay Area urban Indian community and the organizations that flourished there. It was from these groups, as Fortunate Eagle points out, that a larger, more political umbrella organization called the United Bay Area Council of American Indian Affairs, Inc. was formed. As time passed, the United Council gradually became more politicized and became one of the major forces leading to the occupation of Alcatraz Island. Fortunate Eagle provides an intriguing look into the plans for the Alcatraz occupation as only one who was an active participant could do.

In "Alcatraz Recollections," Tim Findley provides us with a professional journalist's view of the occupation and the events that led up to it. Findley, at the time of the occupation, was a writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and an acquaintance of Adam Fortunate Eagle. Findley was instrumental in arranging meetings and opening his home to the Indian people who would plan the occupation and to the non-Indian press, which would be so important in putting the issues of the Alcatraz Indians before the American public. Findley provides poignant views into the lives and personalities of some key participants whom he came to know well during the nineteen-month occupation.

LaNada Boyer's "Reflections of Alcatraz" provides us with a firsthand, behind(and in front of)-the-scenes account of the occupation—its planning and execution. Boyer was one of the original small group that landed on the island in November 1969; she was involved in the occupation until it ended, and she continued afterwards as a native activist and leader. In this telling of the Alcatraz occupation, Boyer shows us the decision-making process, the points of agreement and contention, the powerful unity and disunity that characterize all important historical moments. She tells us about the celebrities and national figures who became involved in the occupation and visited the island. Her analysis

reveals the odd juxtaposition of the occupiers and the nationally prominent visitors: On the one hand are the native people who took over and lived on the island; on the other are the rich and famous sweeping in and out. Boyer's paper makes the important point that the media play a central role—for good and for ill—in all activism, and particularly Indian activism.

Steve Talbot's article, "Behind Alcatraz," places the occupation in its contemporary context, listing the contributors that provided the meeting grounds, guidance, and vision that formed the foundation upon which the occupation was built. Talbot describes the establishment of the first courses in Native American studies at the University of California, Berkeley, thus identifying the important intellectual atmosphere in which the protest agenda was created. Talbot takes a stand: He names names; he gives credit and criticism; and he provides us with the invaluable insights gained from his vantage point as an involved participant.

"In Memories of Alcatraz, 1969," Luis Kemnitzer's vantage point is both similar to and dissimilar from that of Talbot. Kemnitzer was an advisor and facilitator for the development of the Native American studies program at San Francisco State University, and he worked with Richard Oakes—the now silent but then central voice of the occupation. Kemnitzer reflects on the role of the university as a setting where those who would lead the Alcatraz occupation could come together, define themselves and their goals, make connections with those who came before, and leave a legacy for those who follow. Kemnitzer admits that, while the occupation was interesting at the time, he did not realize the importance it would come to have. This reminds us all of the impossibility of knowing which events are simply "interesting" and which will leave an enduring legacy.

Edward D. Castillo's "A Reminiscence of the Alcatraz Occupation" begins with a lament about the world before Alcatraz, where he spent his college years without native peers or professors and without financial support from federal Indian programs. He also tells about the exciting changes under way in 1969, when he became part of the fledgling American Indian studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles, as an instructor of Indian history. A visit from Richard Oakes, who spoke of the planned occupation of Alcatraz Island, set a new direction for Castillo and many of his students. His paper furnishes the details of the November 1969 landing on the island, the role of the media in shaping the national image of the occupation, his own struggles

with his job, his activism, his responsibilities, and his integrity. Castillo's rendering of the occupation reveals the personal costs and challenges of activism, as well as the unpredictable course of events that activism can set in motion.

Jack D. Forbes's "Alcatraz and the Native Struggle for Liberation" also relates the important role of Native American studies programs as intellectual homes and meeting places for native people interested in social change. Forbes and several of his students in Native American studies at the University of California, Davis, joined the protesters on Alcatraz immediately following the initial occupation. Forbes provides historical background for the Alcatraz occupation and discusses an important legacy of Alcatraz: the establishment of D-Q University in Davis, California, following the successful occupation of a former military communications facility in 1970. Forbes concludes that the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island has another legacy: The occupation transformed the island itself into an enduring symbol of native struggle and resistance.

Len Foster's paper, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island: Remembering Alcatraz Twenty-five Years After," illustrates the power of activism to transform the lives of individuals—both those who participate and those who witness the protest from a distance but are pulled by its magnetism. Like Castillo, Foster recalls the experience of being an Indian before Alcatraz. He recounts his early athletic career in high school, at Western Arizona College, and at Colorado State University, and the growing tension in his life: He was increasingly torn between the world of pre-professional athletics and his contact with Chicano and Indian activists in the late 1960s. The turning point for Foster was December 1969, when he hitchhiked across the country to join the protesters on Alcatraz Island. During this and several subsequent visits, he underwent a personal transformation, which he discusses here and which follows a parallel path with those taken by many others.

George Horse Capture writes of the personal meaning of the Alcatraz occupation and its impact on his life. Horse Capture's reminiscence, "From the Reservation to the Smithsonian via Alcatraz," reminds us of the world before Alcatraz, when Native American history and identity were devalued and demeaned by federal policies, social conventions, and personal disparagement. Horse Capture describes the bleakness and despair felt by many native people during the decades before Alcatraz as they struggled to survive in mainstream America. He also tells of the profound

personal meaning of the occupation and his visit to the island. Horse Capture reminds us of the tone of those times and of the power of that moment. He argues that "the Indian world would never be the same after this" and notes the disjuncture between his feelings and experiences as part of the Alcatraz moment and his former life. In the years since then, Horse Capture has been able to blend his two lives into one, a blending that led back to the reservation and out again.

John Garvey and Troy Johnson provide us with the story of the government's response to the occupation in "The Government and the Indians: The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island, 1969–1971." Garvey and Johnson present a detailed, day-to-day assessment of these events as they unfolded, including Richard Nixon's 1970 self-determination address and the FBI's role in responding to the occupation. Their accounting gives us an inside view of the cast of characters charged with the official handling of the Alcatraz occupation, many of whom were quite well known: J. Edgar Hoover, Richard M. Nixon, John Ehrlichman, Leonard Garment, Walter Hickel, George Murphy, Louis R. Bruce, Ronald Reagan, Bud Krogh, and Robert Kleindienst.

The last five papers represent more distant assessments of the meaning and impact of the Alcatraz occupation. Some of them reveal that the legacy of Alcatraz is not without controversy. Robert A. Rundstrom's "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971" examines Alcatraz as a physical, social, and symbolic "place." Rundstrom tells us that geographers attribute four elements to a place: a physical site, a tangible, created environment; a social milieu; and a set of personal and shared meanings. He then proceeds to examine the ways in which the Alcatraz occupiers reconstructed the island's physical appearance, environmental character, social structure, and personal and collective meaning. Not much of the physical transformation of the occupation remains today; government bulldozers have erased what little was changed. Rundstrom shows us, however, that the meaning of Alcatraz has survived official cleanup efforts: In February 1994, the American Indian Movement selected the island as the starting point for a nationwide Long Walk, thus confirming the continuing symbolic importance of Alcatraz.

In "A Warrior at Wounded Knee: A Spiritual Journey," Woody Kipp reflects on his service in the U.S. Marine Corps, the twenty months he served in Vietnam as a support combat engineer

working on F4-B Phantom jet aircraft. During his tour in Vietnam, Kipp began to draw parallels between late twentieth-century American foreign policy in Southeast Asia and U.S. domestic policy toward American Indians throughout the centuries of contact. This awareness was heightened in February 1973, when Kipp witnessed those same Phantom jets flying over the Pine Ridge Reservation during the siege of Wounded Knee. Kipp's journey from the teenager who joined the Marine Corps to a professor of journalism in his home state of Montana is one of reconnecting with his native heritage and spiritual traditions. His story traces his personal rebirth during the turbulent era marked by the Alcatraz occupation, the conflict at Wounded Knee, and the many other acts of protest that occurred during the 1970s.

Karren Baird-Olson's "Reflections of an AIM Activist: Has It All Been Worth It?" is also a story of personal growth and renewal. Baird-Olson recounts an incident in 1976, when she and her children were arrested for protesting outside the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington, D.C. She uses this incident to illustrate the federal authorities' repressive response to native activism—in particular to members of the American Indian Movement. Then she tries to answer the question she poses in the title of the paper: Was it all worth it? Baird-Olson argues that AIM's activism following the Alcatraz occupation was crucial to the progress toward native rights that has occurred in the past quarter-century. She also notes, however, that she and other AIM activists have paid dearly for those years of protest—in loss of life, careers, and personal relationships. Despite these costs, her answer to the paper's central question is "yes."

In "The Bloody Wake of Alcatraz: Political Repression of the American Indian Movement during the 1970s," Ward Churchill paints a graphic picture of federal violence against AIM activists in the aftermath of Alcatraz, and particularly during and after the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973. He argues that, despite federal repression, AIM and other activist groups have accomplished a great deal: the organization of the Longest Walk in 1978, the efforts to free Leonard Peltier, the formation of the Black Hills Alliance, the establishment of Camp Yellow Thunder, the founding of the International Indian Treaty Council, the efforts to protest and balance coverage of the Columbus Quincentenary. Churchill also notes the resurgence of AIM chapters and personal Indian identification around the country. He also refers to some of the tensions and controversies surrounding AIM and its leaders,

which are yet another legacy of the decades of protest following the Alcatraz occupation.

The final paper, "To Guard against Invading Indians: Struggling for Native Community in the Southeast," by Zug G. Standing Bear, examines the important but contested outcome of the transformative power of the Alcatraz occupation and the activism and resurgence of Indian pride that followed in its wake: the formation of new Native American communities by individuals who are seeking to rediscover their Indian ancestry, to relearn lost languages and traditions, to reconnect with native spirituality, and to rebuild community. Standing Bear writes of his work with the Deer Clan, a group of individuals of native ancestry in Georgia who have embarked on such a collective journey. The Deer Clan is one of many nonrecognized Indian groups and communities—some older and more established than others. The clan's members are only a few of many nontribally enrolled native individuals. The emergence of these groups and the resurgence of their individual identities is another important, though sometimes controversial, legacy of the revitalization of native pride sparked by the Alcatraz occupation.

These papers reflect the many faces of the Alcatraz occupation. They are written by Indians and non-Indians, observers and participants, critics and supporters. Many of the authors have taken this opportunity to reminisce about their involvement in the occupation, to set the record straight, to assess the success or failure of Alcatraz itself or the entire activist period. Many of them speak of the personal meaning and impact of the occupation on their lives; others reflect on the personal and collective meaning and legacy of the occupation for the lives of others. While this is by no means a complete or even balanced look back at Alcatraz, twenty-five years after, it is an effort to commemorate an important moment in American history. We hope that you will find reading it as fascinating as we did putting it together.