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## Alcatraz, Activism, and Accommodation

VINE DELORIA, JR.

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Alcatraz and Wounded Knee 1973 have come to symbolize the revival of Indian fortunes in the late twentieth century, so we hesitate to discuss the realities of the time or to look critically at their actual place in modern Indian history. We conclude that it is better to wrap these events in romantic notions and broker that feeling in exchange for further concessions from the federal government; consequently, we fail to learn from them the hard lessons that will serve us well in leaner times.

Activism in the 1950s was sporadic but intense. In 1957, Lumbee people surrounded a Ku Klux Klan gathering in North Carolina and escorted the hooded representatives of white supremacy back to their homes sans weapons and costumes. In 1961, a strange mixture of Six Nations people and non-Indian supporters attempted a citizens' arrest of the secretary of the interior, and, sometime during this period, a band of "True Utes" briefly took over the agency offices at Fort Duchesne. The only context for these events was the long suffering of small groups of people bursting forth in an incident that illustrated oppression but suggested no answer to pressing problems. In 1964, the "fish-ins" in the Pacific Northwest produced the first activism with an avowed goal; continual agitation in that region eventually resulted in *U.S. v. Washington*, which affirmed once and for all the property rights of Northwest tribes for both subsistence and commercial fishing.

Indians benefited substantially from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the ensuing doctrines concerning the poor, which

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surfaced in the Economic Opportunity Act and more particularly in its administration. The civil rights movement had roots in a hundred small gatherings of concerned attorneys brought together by Jack Greenberg and Thurgood Marshall to determine the legal and philosophical basis for overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Concentrating on the concept of *equality*, a series of test cases involving access to professional education in the border states cut away the unexamined assumption that separate facilities for higher education automatically meant equality of treatment and equality of the substance of education.

In 1954, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* stripped away the cloak of indifference and hypocrisy and required the dismantling of segregated schools. By extension, if schools were to be integrated, why not lunch counters and buses, and why not equality under the law in all public places and programs? The *Brown* strategy was created on behalf of the oppressed multitudes of African-Americans but did not involve the rank and file people until the movement went into the streets and lunch counters of the South. With the announcement of “Black Power” by Stokely Carmichael and SNCC in 1966—made possible in some measure by the insistence of federal War on Poverty administrators that the “poor” knew better than anyone else what poverty was and how to combat it—the civil rights movement became a people’s movement.

A people’s movement has many benefits—the mass of minority groups are involved, and political strength increases dramatically—but it also has immense vulnerability in that goals that can be seen, articulated, and achieved are surrendered in favor of symbolic acts that illustrate and demonstrate the suffering and frustrations of the people. Symbolic acts demand attention from an otherwise unaware general public, but they also fail to articulate the necessity of specific actions that can and must be taken by the government at the local, state, and federal levels to alleviate the crisis. Consequently, the choice of remedy is given to the institutional structure that oppresses people and to the good and bad politicians and career bureaucrats who operate the institution.

The Poor People’s March of 1968 best exemplifies the problem of a people’s movement unable to articulate specific solutions and see them through to completion. Organized partially in memory of the slain Martin Luther King and partially as an effort to secure increases in the funding of social programs, the march floundered

when participants spent their time harassing members of the cabinet about problems that had no immediate solution and demanding sympathy and understanding from federal officials who could not translate these concerns into programmatic responses. Smaller protests had maintained a decent level of funding for poverty programs in past years, but, this time, the march faced the bitter reality of the Vietnam War and the impossibility of continuing to expand the federal budget into unrealistic deficits.

It is important to note that, while the Indian fishing rights struggle maintained itself with measurable goals, Alcatraz represented an Indian version of the Poor People's March. The proclamation presented by the first invaders of the island demanded a bewildering set of responses from the federal government, focusing on transfer of the island's title to an Indian organization and the funding of an educational center on the island for the thousands of Indians who had made the Bay Area their home. The popular interpretation of the occupation was that Indians were entitled to own the island because it was federal surplus property and therefore qualified under a provision of the 1868 treaty of Fort Laramie.

Unfortunately, the treaty provision was a myth. Red Cloud had simply remained in the Powder River country until the government withdrew its troops from the Bozeman Trail and then, satisfied that the trail was closed, arrived at Fort Laramie in November 1868 to sign the treaty. During the Alcatraz occupation, when White House staff and Department of Interior lawyers looked at the treaty, they could find no phrase that justified returning the island to the Indian occupants; consequently, they were blocked from using any executive powers to resolve the crisis.

The initial group of Indian occupants was composed of students from Bay Area colleges and universities, but, as the occupation continued, these people were replaced with enthusiastic recruits from across the nation and with unemployed people who had nowhere else to go. The mood of the occupants was that they should use the press as often as possible; thus the goal of the movement quickly became confused, with various spokespeople articulating different philosophies on different occasions.

The difference between Alcatraz and the fishing rights fight, and between the Brown litigation and the Black Power movement, should be made clear: Behind the sit-ins and the fish-ins was the almost certain probability that, should activists be convicted

at the trial court level, they would have their convictions overturned by a higher court and/or the object of their protest would be upheld at a higher level of litigation. *Brown* and the Medicine Creek fishing rights treaty were already federal law before people went out to protest; the protests were made on behalf of impartial enforcement of existing law. This foundation of legality did not exist for either the Poor People's March or the occupation of Alcatraz. Therefore, in legal terms, these activities meant nothing.

My role in Alcatraz was sporadic and, in a few instances, not welcomed by some of the activists on the rock. While I was director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), I had worked for several years with people in the Bay Area as part of the NCAI's concern for relocated Indians. I entered law school in the fall of 1967 and, by the time of the occupation, had already written *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which was released in early October 1969. Some years before, Richard MacKenzie and others had briefly landed on Alcatraz, and, in the years since that first invasion, Bay Area activists such as Adam Nordwall had disrupted Columbus Day celebrations and, with some modest successes, generally tried to focus the attention of Bay Area politics on urban Indian problems. Ironically, some of the people who were now shouting "Red Power" into every microphone they could find had called me a communist the year before for doing a Frank McGee NBC news interview that advocated Red Power.

Adam Nordwall saw that the occupation would flounder unless it was tied to some larger philosophical issue that could be seen by the American public as important to their own concerns for justice. During the fall of 1969, I was asked several times to come out to Alcatraz to discuss how the people on the island could transform the occupation into a federal issue that could be resolved by congressional action. I favored announcing that not only did Indians want the island, we wanted a federal policy of land restoration that would provide a decent land base for small reservations, return submarginal lands to tribes that had them, and, in some cases, restore original reservation boundaries.

On Christmas Eve 1969, I flew out to California to discuss the land issue with people on the island, but the meeting never got off the ground. Instead of listening to our presentation on land restoration, the activists began quarreling about who was in charge of the operation. Richard Oakes had many supporters, but he also had many rivals. Adam and I were considered intruders because we had not been in the original invasion. About all we got

out of the meeting was the sneer that the activists had the whole world watching them, and they were in control of Indian policy. We pointed out that a sensible program had to be articulated so that the administration could act, but we got no positive response.

In January 1970, hoping to highlight a land and treaty issue, I invited Merv Griffin to come out to Alcatraz and do part of a show from there. Unfortunately, many of the people on the Rock had not moved forward in their thinking; Merv got the old response of how the island belonged to Indians under the 1868 treaty and how they wanted to establish an educational and vocational training facility on the island.

In the spring of 1970, a group of us held a national urban Indian conference on Alcatraz in another effort to provide a context for securing the island. In November 1969, this same urban group had held its conference the weekend before the San Francisco Indian center burned, but now, under different leadership, we were trying to focus everything on the Bay Area in the hope of defining an issue that the public would embrace. The meeting was not long under way when a man and woman began to scream at each other across the room, viciously and seemingly without any provocation. Every time anyone would propose a course of action, one or the other would jump up and let loose a string of curses designed to infuriate everyone. Most people sat there politely listening to the nonsense, but eventually the meeting just dissolved. Later, we discovered they were a husband and wife who went through this performance at every meeting they attended.

While our meeting was being held, we learned that Richard Oakes and his supporters had been thrown off the island the day before and that they were likely to confront us when we returned to the mainland. We met only one sullen young man who warned us that he was going to remember our names and faces. Later that evening, as we sat around trying to figure out what to do, we hit on a plan. We had someone call Oakes's headquarters and, in his best reservation English, relate that he was supervising two buses of Navajo boys who were traveling to the Hoopa Bear Dance and wanted to be housed for the night. The Oakes contingent immediately tried to enlist these Navajo as a force to help Oakes recapture the island. They gave us directions for finding their headquarters, and we promised to come help them. A few minutes after hanging up the phone, we decided it would be even better to include buses of Navajo girls, so we had a rather promi-

nent Indian woman call the headquarters and pretend that she was matron over two busloads of girls from Navajo Community College who were looking to make contact with the Navajo boys. This phone call created a dilemma for us and for Oakes's people. They wanted to get the two busloads of girls and lose the boys; we wondered how long we could continue to drive four phantom buses around the Bay Area.

Our pretend Navajo man then called Oakes's people back and said he had gotten lost and was in Oakland, and we got new directions for reaching their headquarters. Our woman then got back on the phone and told Oakes's group that the girls' buses were only a few blocks away. Their response was that they would go out and buy food and get ready to welcome the girls, apparently forgetting that the boys' buses would be along shortly also. We hung up and pondered the situation we had created. The consensus was that we should call back and confess the whole thing before everyone was inconvenienced. We were just about to confess when one of our group said, "Wait a minute! Real Indians would just go their own way and not say a word; we are thinking like responsible, educated Indians." So we just went back to our hotel to bed.

The next morning, as we embarked for Alcatraz to finish the meeting, we were greeted by two surly Oakes supporters. They told us to go ahead and visit the island, but they assured us that we would not stay long because they had reinforcements of four hundred Navajo arriving momentarily and we would be thrown off the Rock along with the anti-Oakes people. Needless to say, our meeting went well, and the Navajo never did arrive. I will not mention the names in our little group, but I can confess that they are still prominent, responsible, national Indian leaders.

The occupation of Alcatraz lingered on. A rougher group of people occupied the island, and it became useless to try to make sense of the occupation. Increasingly, it became a hazard to go out there. Eventually, many of the buildings were burned, and feeble, nonsensical ultimatums were issued by the declining population on the Rock. Finally, the government swooped down and took the remaining people away. I visited the island about a decade later and heard a surprisingly mild and pro-Indian explanation of the occupation from a Park Service guide. I walked around the grounds and remembered some of the difficult meetings we had held there and how, several times, we almost had a coalition that could have affected land policy. Unfortunately, most of the people

involved in the occupation had no experience in formulating policy and saw their activities as primarily aimed at awakening the American public to the plight of Indians. Thus a great opportunity to change federal programs for Indians was lost.

*The Trail of Broken Treaties* came along in the fall of 1972. By that time, the activists had devised the Twenty Points, which, in my opinion, is the best summary document of reforms put forth in this century. Written primarily by Hank Adams, who supervised the fishing rights struggle until the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Indians, it is comprehensive and philosophical and has broad policy lines that can still be adopted to create some sense of fairness and symmetry in federal Indian policy.

Then came the Wounded Knee occupation, with its aftermath of trials and further violence. Indians were well represented in the media from the Alcatraz occupation through the Wounded Knee trials, but, unfortunately, each event dealt primarily with the symbols of oppression and did not project possible courses of action that might be taken to solve problems.

The policy posture of Indians at Alcatraz was part of a historical process begun during the War on Poverty when people demanded action from the government but failed to articulate the changes they wanted. With the incoming Nixon administration in 1969, we clamored for an Indian to be appointed as commissioner. Because we failed to support Robert Bennett, who was already occupying the office, the inept Louie Bruce was installed. Bruce's chaotic administration produced an era in which résumés were enhanced and job descriptions were watered down so that the respective administrations could appoint Indian puppets to symbolize the presence of Indians in the policymaking process. Today the government, under Ada Deer, is at work trying to create a new set of categories—"historic" and "nonhistoric" tribes—so that benefits and services can be radically reduced. When Indians do not clearly articulate what they want, the government feels free to improvise, even if it means creating new policies that have no roots in anything except the fantasies of the creator.

Alcatraz was more than a protest against the oppressive conditions under which Indians lived. In large part, it was a message that we wanted to determine our own destiny and make our own decisions. That burden is still upon us and weighs heavily when contemporary tribal chairpeople are consulted about policy directions. Almost always, immediate concerns or irritating technicalities are regarded as important in the consulta-

tive process, and, consequently, it is increasingly difficult to determine exactly where people think we are going. Like the activists at Alcatraz, we often mill around, keenly aware that we have the ears of the public but uncertain what to do next. Until we can sketch out realistic scenarios of human and resource goals, we continue to resemble those occupants of the Rock a quarter of a century ago: We want change, but we do not know what change.