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Rock, Reservation and Prison: The Native American Occupation of Alcatraz Island

JEFF SKLANSKY

INTRODUCTION

With his famous words of surrender, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces tribe finally yielded his people's control over their lives and lands: "The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. . . . I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."¹ The last of the great Indian Wars thus ended with a plea for tribal children; the great war chief hoped his descendants might find peace in the arms of his conquering foe. As the Nez Perces prisoners of war were marched toward Indian Territory, the United States at last held total dominion over Native America. That dominion would not be seriously challenged throughout the ensuing century, as American Indians found their cultural and tribal identity the object of continued assault. But by the age of ethnic awakening in the 1960s, Native Americans in increasing numbers saw their essential problem in the legacy of Chief Joseph's and others' surrender of self-determination. White control seemed a dead end.

Such was the heritage that informed a handful of young, urban Indians in undertaking the first, perhaps greatest Native

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American act of collective rebellion since the surrender: the reclaiming of Alcatraz Island. The nineteen-month occupation that followed was to transform Alcatraz from a defunct federal penitentiary into a potent symbol of American Indian consciousness—or, more precisely, a set of complicated, conflicting, liberating and defining signs of contemporary Native America. Alcatraz quickly became “our Statue of Liberty,” in the words of a Comanche. “THE symbolic act of Indian awareness,” *Look* magazine dubbed the occupation.² In the glow of global publicity on this rocky stage, American Indians claimed much more than a barren and abandoned island; they asserted their shared power and pride in rhetoric and imagery that transcended their immediate claim to the island itself.

The choice of Alcatraz for that symbolic revolt revealed much about the unique position of America’s 625,000 Indians as the sixties drew to a close.³ Twenty years later, Thanksgiving approaches, as it did for the tribal pilgrims to Alcatraz in 1969, and Indian America remains beset by the same conflicts and heartaches that spurred the occupiers to act: land claims, governmental mismanagement and neglect, poverty on a Third World scale. Image and substance go hand-in-hand in American politics, social policy and public concern, and today’s American Indians continue to languish in the symbolic netherworld from which the Alcatraz occupiers departed. Dartmouth College Prof. Michael Dorris wrote last year: “In the sound bite of national folklore, (Indians) have metamorphosed into icons, totems of America as evocative, and ultimately as vapid, as a flag factory.”⁴ The Alcatraz occupation fell short of its stated goal of assuming permanent Indian control over the island, but it was a highly effective rallying point for Native American self-assertion and self-empowerment, making it surely a worthy subject for further consideration now. Despite its historic significance and continuing relevance, the occupation has received relatively scant academic attention.

This study differs in several respects from previous works on American Indian cultural and political organization: unlike a conventionally historical approach or a sociological treatment, this essay emphasizes meaning rather than function, language and imagery rather than mechanics and constituent parts, ideology and ideals rather than causes and effects. More could be written about who went to Alcatraz; how their efforts led or did not lead to concrete gains; the reasons for the changing response among tribes and non-Indians; the social, economic, legal and political

bases for the occupiers' claims and complaints; and other aspects of the occupation. The focus here is almost exclusively on what the occupiers were *saying* through their words and deeds, and to a lesser extent on how those messages were received.

Of course, Alcatraz cannot be seen as entirely symbolic without belittling the depth of the occupiers' commitment to keep the island. "There are those who believed this action was 'not serious.' Some thought it was strictly a 'symbolic stance,'" Rupert Costo, founder of the American Indian Historical Society of San Francisco, wrote near the end of the occupation. "If this latter might have been true at the start, it certainly is not true today. The Indians on Alcatraz are in dead earnest. They want the island."⁵ The occupiers did not see themselves or their actions as mere symbols, and it would be unfair to portray them as such. As Hazel W. Hertzberg notes in her overview of modern pan-Indian movements, "Indians must be seen not as symbols but as men and women and their history as the rich, complex, and tragic human experience which it is."⁶

Yet even as the occupation grew to include up to 200 Indians living on the island at one time and many more visitors to the pan-Indian "mecca" swelling its ranks on weekends, the primary significance of Alcatraz lay in its symbolic power, for Native Americans as well as non-Indians.⁷ Here, too, lies the lasting importance of the occupation in Native American history. For while the occupation ended, and with it Indian rule over the island, "Alcatraz, the idea, lives."⁸ Recalled Linda Aranaydo, one of the original members of the occupation: "It was always more symbolic to me, I guess, than real."⁹

Several fundamental visions of the occupation defined its meaning for its participants and observers. These central images, which will be examined in detail below, were those of cultural revitalization through independence, publicity for and protest of the position of Native Americans nationwide, and rebellion against white oppression. To analyze Alcatraz as a metaphor, or set of metaphors, for Indian America is not to imply that the occupation was unserious or unreal. It is, rather, to begin to understand the real nature and achievements of that event. An examination of Alcatraz offers not merely a study in political radicalism or group action, but also a glimpse of a diverse, complex ethnic community struggling for new life. In this light, an understanding of the occupation's successes and failures highlights the possibilities and limitations of ethnic revival in modern America.

CONTEXT AND CHRONOLOGY

The Alcatraz occupation was no more isolated in Native American cultural history than the island could ever be in the heart of a thriving city. It represented the meeting of various currents in Native America: a deep distrust of reform or change in Indian affairs, a legacy of pan-Indian political action and a new, radical impulse for ethnic activism. Before turning to the occupation itself, it is important to take a closer look at these currents that entered into it.

One of the results of the federal government's efforts to strip Native Americans of their Indian or tribal identity has been a general conservatism within Native America. The treaty system by which American Indians lost their property, and later their lifestyle, fostered a strong resistance to any change in Indian-white relations, even when clothed in the generally deceptive garb of reform or improvement in the Native American situation. A "basic conservatism was built up over the generations," notes Terry Wilson, professor of Native American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.¹⁰ American Indians therefore were wary of attempts to reformulate social or ethnic relations in the 1960s; what many sought, instead, was a recognition and fulfillment of long-standing legal rights accorded the tribes. The Native American writer Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote in his "Indian Manifesto" of 1969, "The problem is and always has been the adjustment of the legal relationship between the Indian tribes and the federal government, between the true owners of the land and the usurpers."¹¹ Fittingly, the taking of Alcatraz initially was framed not in the language of civil disobedience, but rather as an assertion of legal rights.

The second major historical influence on the occupation was that of earlier pan-Indian social movements, modelled on the Society of American Indians formally begun in 1911. Like the organizers of the Alcatraz occupation, early pan-Indian reformers were predominantly urban, products of non-Indian colleges and universities, who straddled the line between the tribes and white society. These transplanted Indians saw their ties to each other across tribal boundaries in ways reservation Indians did not. And, like the occupiers, they looked to an inter-tribal "Indian" culture for a sense of nature, spirituality and identity in the whirl of the city.¹² By the 1960s, two large umbrella organizations had

made pan-Indianism a part of the Native American establishment: the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indian Youth Council. Although rivals in other respects, both groups suggested that inter-tribal unity of the kind that would be espoused on Alcatraz was crucial in asserting the Indians' place in white society.

The rise of black and Chicano empowerment movements inevitably generated interest among Native Americans seeking attention, respect and self-determination. "At that time, the Chicanos were beginning to form and have their *La Raza* and be proud of their heritage," explained Shirley Guavara, another member of the Alcatraz occupation. "The blacks had this going. And we all felt that maybe at this time the Indian movement should get going."¹³ The spirit of the time was ripe for Native American action to regain what tribal people had lost. This spirit was perhaps most contagious in the San Francisco Bay area, already host to the Free Speech Movement, the Black Panthers and the hippies of the Haight-Ashbury district. Linda Aranaydo noted: "It was a politicized time and it was also a time when people took democracy real seriously—that sense of, I'm an individual but I have power, as an individual and then as part of a group, to change things."¹⁴

It was in this eclectic Native American soil of conservatism, progressive pan-Indianism and radical ethnic assertion that the Alcatraz occupation blossomed. The diversity of its roots helps to explain the presence of complex, often conflicting ideas about the meaning of Alcatraz during the occupation. A brief review of the chronology of events will facilitate later consideration of these impulses.

The federal prison on Alcatraz closed in 1963. In March 1964, five urban Sioux led by an Oakland welder "occupied" Alcatraz for three hours and filed a legal claim on behalf of the Indian people, seeking to build a Native American university on the site.¹⁵ The 1963 occupiers and those who followed them five years later cited the Fort Laramie Sioux Treaty of 1868 in arguing that American Indians were entitled to unused surplus federal lands.¹⁶ In April 1964, the U.S. Attorney General found the Indian claims invalid.¹⁷

Despite numerous proposals for its use, Alcatraz remained unutilized in the hands of the federal General Services Administration until the 1969 occupation. For nearly a year before the

occupation, the United Bay Area Council of American Indians considered bidding to build an Indian cultural center and job center for the West Coast on Alcatraz. Then, on November 1, 1969, the American Indian Center in San Francisco that had served an estimated 30,000 Native Americans in the area burned down.¹⁸ A hastily-organized conference of Indian high school and college students at the University of California in Santa Cruz already had resolved to make a demonstration on Alcatraz for the educational needs of Native Americans, and the fire provided additional ignition.¹⁹

Fourteen college students reoccupied Alcatraz on November 11, leaving only after a nineteen-hour standoff with government officials. On November 20, the Indians were back, this time with eighty to one hundred participants.²⁰ At first, their goals were modest and unclear, but the occupation snowballed quickly, with heightened rhetoric fueling rising hopes that the Indians might actually keep the island.²¹ More than 300 Native Americans from dozens of tribes across the nation celebrated Thanksgiving dinner in the exercise area behind the main cell-block, dining on a "flood of food" from area restaurants.²² Virtually overnight, the occupation was attracting international attention and daily headlines. Jane Fonda visited the prison, as did Merv Griffin and various moviemakers.²³

The "moccasin telegraph" by which information circulated throughout Native America carried the news of a cultural and political rebirth to the reservations and other cities. Delegations of tribal people arrived on pilgrimages; one writer reported, "Indian people come, stay a few days, and then leave, taking with them a sense of wonderment that it has happened."²⁴ The government, meanwhile, adopted a policy of wait-and-see, evidently expecting the occupation to die of its own accord.

There were indications by January that the government might be right. Leadership and participation in the occupation were changing rapidly; many came only for sporadic or weekend visits, and others left during weekdays to work or go to school. With no movement from the government and no new directions being taken by the occupiers, the occupation began to lose attention and momentum.

In March, the Department of the Interior made its first and only major counter-proposal for the use of Alcatraz: an Indian Joint Planning Committee "composed of Indian writers, historians, ar-

tists, religious leaders, 'grass roots people,' and so forth . . . chosen by the Secretary of the Interior" would develop a master plan combining recreational uses with such possible Indian uses as monuments, a cultural center, and a museum.²⁵ The occupiers rejected the offer.

Months passed with little change, causing a gradual loss of enthusiasm for the occupation both within and outside Native America. By the occupation's anniversary, fifty to ninety people remained on the island; most of the original occupiers had left.²⁶ Lacking electricity, natural gas or running water, the island's residents held on through a second winter despite deteriorating conditions. In March 1971, amid speculation that the federal government soon would evict its unwanted tenants, a spokesperson for the occupation told the Associated Press: "You can be certain we will not leave Alcatraz. . . . We have come too far and through too much to start giving land back to the white man."²⁷ Three months later, federal marshals rounded up fifteen Native Americans found on the island during a work day and ended the occupation.

This unadorned chronology reveals little of the occupation's import and impact. After years of decrying without response the abuses of white society, Native Americans found the key to recognition on the twelve windswept acres of Alcatraz. The images of proud, bold tribal men and women claiming this island prison as their own suddenly made Native Americans come alive from the dry pages of history, and made their cultural aspirations seem real.

Three sets of images encapsulated the occupation. They represent the three basic ways in which the occupiers saw what they were doing and portrayed it to the world. First, there was the familiar image of the American Indian of old, dramatically reasserting itself in a modern environment: here was the chieftain in feathered headdress addressing reporters, the tepee on the prison grounds. This was the symbol of cultural revival and isolationism, the rejection of illusory progress on the mainland in favor of peace on the centuries-old island. Second, there was the "progressive" Indian, the American Indian as Indian-American. Thanksgiving on Alcatraz was the dominant image here, Native Americans seen celebrating the pilgrim holiday with food brought from the mainland, as well as appearing on the Merv Griffin Show and sitting beside federal officials who wore coats and ties.

The message concerned the treatment of Native Americans as proper American citizens, rather than a resignation of their citizenship. Alcatraz was not an island, but a bridge to greater understanding and sensitivity. Third, there was the prison itself as an image of total rebellion, the inmates running the institution. *Look* magazine provided perhaps the most striking picture of the "Indian uprising" in its issue of June 22, 1970: rows of confident and powerful-looking Native Americans stared out defiantly from a two-page black-and-white photo set in the main cell block, clearly in control in this most unlikely spot.²⁸ On the February 1970 cover of *Ramparts* magazine, a twenty-two-year-old Shoshone-Bannock woman with long, jet-black hair fixed her determined gaze on the camera in front of a sign in bleeding red graffiti: "Better Red Than Dead." Here were the symbols of revolt and conquest, the influence of the time and place in sharpest relief.

These three visions of the occupation formed not so much a triad of separate, independent ideals as faces of a single stone. They both reinforced and contradicted each other. Certainly none of the occupiers or their actions may be seen as entirely in the realm of one concept of the occupation or another. Only by analyzing each vision separately, however, can one appreciate fully the meaning of the occupation.

THE ROCK

"We Hold The Rock!" exulted Indians of All Tribes, as the Alcatraz occupiers now called themselves, in January 1970.²⁹ Jutting out 130 feet above the swift currents of San Francisco Bay, the Rock seemed an ideal place for Native Americans to reclaim their cultural power. Here, insulated from the menace and confusion of white society, Indians might begin anew. The occupation, its participants hoped, would herald the final realization by tribal people that their identity lay in their Indian roots rather than in their Americanized branches. A return to those roots would involve a cultural re-flowering, coupled with a denial of American notions of progress.

Isolationism and revival were the guiding principles in this metaphor for the occupation. It suggested, as well, Native American self-reliance, autonomy and return to the soil—both literally and figuratively. But the Rock was an incomplete image of Alcatraz at best, and the occupation never approached real spiritual

or practical independence. The picture of a pre-surrender island renaissance was contradicted by the occupation's inherent, pervasive indebtedness to the mainland.

The very thing that had suited Alcatraz for the nation's incorrigibles made it an appropriate symbol of Native America as a cultural island. "Alcatraz is ideal because it's isolated from non-Indian society," said Shirley Keith, one of the occupiers.³⁰ Indians could easily see their historical isolation embodied in Alcatraz; but while that isolation had been a source of suffering and vulnerability in the past, it would now become a source of unity, strength and pride. Peter blue cloud wrote in his "Alcatraz Diary":

We dance upon this turtle island, an isolated people from the rest of society. An isolation long imposed upon us by a colonial system of government which has never truly sought to understand us. We dance on our turtle island and draw strength from one another and from the past. Isolated, we will learn unity and learn to speak out our demands to a deaf government . . . We must forever survive as Indians.³¹

Alcatraz, of course, was hardly the first example of American Indian revivalism. Indeed, such movements have been a recurrent feature of the Native American response to domination and forced acculturation by European settlers. Anthony F. C. Wallace finds traces of this impulse for "revitalization" in a long sequence of religious revivals, dating back to the eighteenth century. In each case, the movement arose, Wallace suggests, in response to an overload of cultural stress brought on by such factors as poverty, subordination to white society and pressures to assimilate. And in each movement, adherents looked to the past rather than the future in seeking to bring on a new messianic age.³²

The image of the Rock developed along similar lines. In the face of a white society that seemed to have relegated the Indian to the status of memory or myth, urban Native Americans saw in the occupation a way of reasserting their ethnic heritage as still relevant in modern times. It was "the first and most fundamental assertion that Native Americans can make: 'We were here first—long before you. And we had a history.'"³³ As in previous Indian revivals, Alcatraz—in the image of the Rock—suggested that the solution to Native Americans' troubles in American society was to leave that society behind for the time being in order to

rediscover their own. What was needed, Vine Deloria, Jr. argued, was "a cultural leave-us-alone agreement in spirit and in fact."³⁴ Alcatraz seemed to offer just such an arrangement.

The religious messianism of earlier revivals found its progeny in the sense that the spirit of the occupation would ripple across Native America, making Alcatraz the locus for a broad cultural renaissance on the mainland. Vicky Santana, transplanted from Browning, Montana to Alcatraz, said: "My tribe [Blackfeet] always says when the buffalo come back they will come from the West. I hope that Alcatraz is the beginning."³⁵ Whites had conquered the Indians' land from the East to West; now the Alcatraz occupiers would turn the tide, beginning at the Golden Gate and spreading to the Atlantic coast. A Sioux medicine man from South Dakota wrote of the occupation,

We picked this place because this movement was to start in the extreme West . . . It will move from the West to the East, no stone will be left unturned. Alcatraz is the starting point. Now in our ceremonies there is big movement. At the end of 10 years, Indians will have an equal place with white men. At the end of 10 years we will have our sacred ground and sweat lodge on the extreme East.³⁶

For years, Indian reformers had urged Native Americans to cast off their tribal baggage and learn to function according to the rules of white society. Alcatraz taught an opposite lesson. "We feel that if we are going to succeed, we must hold on to the old ways. *This is the first and most important reason we went to Alcatraz Island,*" the occupiers wrote to "Indians of North America" in December 1969 (*italics in original*).³⁷ The occupiers' goal of educating tribal people in Native American heritage was manifested in their plans for an "all-Indian education and culture complex" to be built on the island. The complex would include a university focusing on Native American Studies, a spiritual center, a center instructing Indians in traditional ecology and "a great Indian training school."³⁸ Like Chief Joseph, the occupiers hoped to leave a better world for their children, but they conceived of that world, in part, as a reconstruction of pre-surrender Indian society. "Here on this island will be many tribes. Here on this island Indians from all religions will worship. Here on this island our young will learn the old Indian ways," read a statement by Indians of All Tribes.³⁹

The founders of the occupation were young themselves, and many were students. Their desire to elevate Native American Studies to the status of the white-designed curricula of non-Indian colleges and institutions fueled their enthusiasm for Alcatraz. In their "Planning Grant Proposal To Develop An All Indian University And Cultural Complex on Indian Land, Alcatraz," Indians of All Tribes explained, "We didn't want to go through the university machinery coming out white-oriented like the few Indian people before us, or like the non-Indian people who were running our government, our Indian government, or our Indian affairs."⁴⁰ As urban, integrated Native Americans, these students felt a strong need to assert their Indian identity, lest they lose it in the mainstream. Their experience in white-dominated schools convinced them this was not possible without radical action by Indians themselves. "They didn't teach me how to hunt, how to skin deer, how to tan hides. All they wanted me to do was become a part of the machinery, to make me into what they wanted: a *white* Indian," lamented Richard Oakes, a young Mohawk from San Francisco State University who became the first spokesperson for the occupation and perhaps its most important leader.⁴¹ The cultural assault by white society, participants felt, was just as grave as the military assault of the Indian Wars and carried potentially more serious effects. Without a bold counter-attack by Native Americans knowledgeable about and proud of their culture, it would perish. Said Oakes,

We have everything at stake. And if we don't make it now, then we'll get trapped at the bottom of the white world out there, and wind up as some kind of Jack Jones with a social security number and that's all. Not just on Alcatraz, but everywhere, the Indian is in his last stand for cultural survival.⁴²

The occupiers were particularly anxious to challenge the prevailing image of Native America they encountered in white classrooms: a picture of a ghostlike, soulless people with no remaining power or creative culture, a people defeated by modern society. Linda Aranaydo felt frustrated by

having people talk about my culture as if it was always just a culture of economic depression, rather than the thing that I know which gave me life, which gave me all the wonderful things that I had in my life as well

. . . It is true that our societies didn't have economic or political power, but the way they were discussed made me feel more powerless. I got real angry at that, and I think that a lot of other students did at the same time.⁴³

This eagerness to recast Native American identity in the image of past glory translated into an aggressively political drive for self-determination. Self-determination did not imply secession; it did mean a basic restructuring of governmental authority over American Indians, a transferral of power to the Indians themselves. The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs had long been the object of Indian dissatisfaction, excoriated as insensitive, undemocratic and unresponsive to Native American needs and desires. Most importantly, the BIA as well as many establishment tribal leaders represented to Indian activists the rule of white society over tribal people. The Alcatraz occupiers viewed such a paternalistic relationship as inimical to a revival of Native American culture.

"Our move is for self-determination," said Shirley Keith. "We want tribal determination for tribal benefit. We are not going to accept the paternalism of the whites any more."⁴⁴ The very acts of forming a governing council and by-rules for the occupation, and of establishing Indian-run programs for health, education, housing and communication on Alcatraz, were of great significance in the implicit declaration of self-rule. This deliberate abandonment of Native American dependence on non-Indian beneficence clearly was behind the occupiers' angry rejection of the Department of the Interior's counter-proposal to their demands in March 1970. Despite provisions for an Indian committee to consider permanent uses of the island, Indians of All Tribes denounced the proposal as a sham. The proposed committee, selected by the Secretary of the Interior, would be yet another example of "government knows best":

We will no longer be museum pieces, tourist attractions, and politicians' playthings . . . There will be no park on this island because it changes the whole meaning of what we are here for. We are tired, and we are very sad that the government did not fulfill their words. While they speak of helping Indian people, their actions belie their words, in that they want to do our thinking for us.⁴⁵

Closely related to control over life-style and culture, in the minds of the occupiers, was control over the land. Without a place of their own, Native Americans remained in the care of white society. The reservations had been bestowed upon the Indians by the government; only claiming land for themselves, as they did on Alcatraz, could the occupiers feel truly at home. American Indians comprised only a fraction of a percentage of the mainland society, too small a minority to flavor the ethnic stew. They had no urban ghettos and no industries of their own. The American Indian Center in San Francisco had been reduced to ashes. Indians of All Tribes explained,

It finally all came to a point and we decided we would just go liberate our own land since all of our other lands had been taken away and the cities were so crowded and we had nowhere to go together for Indian dances or pow-wows or anything, or even to have our own religious ceremonies.⁴⁶

It was the particular misfortune of Native Americans to live in exile in their own country, made a homeless minority on the very soil of their former home. Alcatraz signified, in part, an attempt to reclaim an Indian homeland, possessing that same security and wholeness that had driven the Jews back to Palestine. "If the United Nations could give Israel to the Jews, certainly the United States can give Alcatraz to the Indians," wrote Dave A. Wilkie in the Indians of All Tribes Newsletter.⁴⁷ Other occupiers recall a feeling that they were among family on the island, on their own turf for the first time. Linda Aranaydo expressed the comfort that came from such isolation with one's own: "Alcatraz was more hospitable to me, without the water, with the prison grounds, with no food and with just this falling-apart old rock . . . than the Bay Area."⁴⁸

Related to the occupiers' desire for a homeland for Native Americans was their hope to escape the bounds of minority status. On the mainland, democracy worked against the far outnumbered Indian community; on Alcatraz, Native Americans could form a majority culture once again: "Every place else other people's priorities came first before priorities of Indian people, and we're kind of like a forgotten minority . . . This is a place where we wanted to come first and we wanted to put our communities first."⁴⁹

The organic relationship between people and land, which

formed an integral part of Native American consciousness, was demonstrated as well in a mystical devotion to ecology that figured prominently in the rhetoric of the occupation. Like followers of other revivalist movements that arose in response to the pressures of modern, urban society, and like previous pan-Indians, the occupiers felt themselves spiritually revived through closeness to nature. Native Americans' experience with white society, they argued, had severed their ties to the land. Destruction of nature necessarily had accompanied destruction of Indian culture. Thus in issuing the occupation "Manifesto," Indians of All Tribes intertwined the fate of their people with that of the land:

Be it known, however, that we are quite serious in our demand to be given ownership of this island in the name of Indians of All Tribes. We are here to stay: Men, women and children. We feel that this request is but little to ask from a government which has systematically stolen our lands, destroyed a once-beautiful landscape, killed off the creatures of nature, polluted air and water, ripped open the very bowels of earth in senseless greed, and instituted a program to annihilate the many Indian tribes of this land by theft, suppression, prejudice, termination, and so-called relocation and assimilation.⁵⁰

Government policy reinforced the Native American identification with land and ecology, administering Indian programs through the BIA, a division of the Department of the Interior. It was a lesson Indian activists seized upon in attacking federal policies they considered exploitative. Lehman Brightman, one of the founders of the United Native Americans in 1968, recalled of Interior Secretary Walter Hickel:

When we saw a tree, he just saw a tree. He didn't see any beauty in it. He saw nothing. He felt preservation was wrong for preservation's sake and conservation was wrong for conservation's sake. And he wanted to do away with Indians like trees.⁵¹

Hickel's office was the first address for the Alcatraz occupiers' demands. In arguing for Native American control of Alcatraz, they repeatedly stressed its nurturing qualities, an "earth mother" reunited with her orphaned "children," the Indians.⁵² An ecology

center and a nature preserve would be central components of their plan for the island. Peter blue cloud wrote:

This cold and windswept island was ours. Unwanted and unknown by the strangers who now lived upon all parts of our continent, we had come home. Our earth mother wanted us here, for we are of the land.⁵³

These, then, were the contours of the Rock as a symbol of the occupation: isolationism; cultural "revitalization" on the model of pre-surrender Native America; a refusal to assimilate further and a rejection of white notions of progress; and self-determination and communion with the land. The island in the bay formed an impressive image of Indian self-reliance. Yet cracks in the rock were quick to appear, revealing the frailty of this foundation for pan-Indian reconstruction.

Terry Wilson noted the special requirements of Native Americans in gaining attention and support: they must make up in unity and appeal to non-Indians what they lack in sheer numbers. "We a long time ago recognized that we have to do two things," Wilson said. "One, we have to mobilize across tribal lines, and secondly, we have to do it in such a way that we get support from the majority culture."⁵⁴ This latter prerequisite for effective action severely limited the degree to which the occupiers could see themselves—or Native America—as truly an island, without dampening their prospects for success. Throughout its lifetime, the occupation was dependent on outside support—food and supplies as well as moral and political backing. It was the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response of outside observers that transformed the occupation from a quick dance in the media spotlight to an event of historic importance. When that support began to wane, the occupation lost much of its direction and hope.

There were other limitations on the ideal of an Indian island. The institutions the occupiers hoped to build on Alcatraz were themselves deeply affected by modern non-Indian society. The notion of a university, accompanied by a library and archives, to teach Native Americans their culture was as firmly entrenched in modern times as the rhetoric of revivalism was in the past. Furthermore, such goals could not be achieved by the occupiers alone. They required government aid and support, as the occupiers immediately recognized. The act of petitioning for help

itself undermined any notions of independence. While the occupiers scorned the government counter-proposal because it was of non-Indian design, they continued to appeal to the government to cede them the land and grant their demands for its use.

Such reliance on external action called into question the idea that anything on Alcatraz was truly a return to a pre-surrender Indian past. The occupiers' actions contradicted their ambitions, the former indicating dependence while the latter insisted on independence. Indians of All Tribes itself was constituted in January 1970 as a non-profit corporation, with a seven-member council or board of directors elected by the general assembly.⁵⁵ Incorporation was necessary in order to attract government funds and outside contributions. In organizing their Alcatraz community, Indians of All Tribes further demonstrated the centrality of ideas which were foreign to traditional Native America. They arranged their "Big Rock School" on the model of non-Indian education; its twelve students, ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade, were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, health and science in addition to Native American history and culture. Students were taken on field trips to such places as the San Francisco Zoo, the Planetarium, and the Oakland Art Museum.⁵⁶ Clearly, these students, and those at the Alcatraz Nursery School, were learning to consider Indian culture one element in their world, rather than their world in and of itself. Dissemination of information on the island was not merely by "moccasin telegraph"; the Indians of All Tribes Newsletter listed a four-member editorial board, three reporters, and four additional staffers when it published its first issue, in January 1970.⁵⁷ A "health clinic" staffed by three volunteer doctors and two nurses began operating on "the second day after the invasion," with regular hours from 8:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. and 24-hour emergency service.⁵⁸

Perhaps no institution on Alcatraz was so imitative of modern non-Indian society as the security force, aptly named the "Bureau of Caucasian Affairs." The roughly ten members of the force bought themselves army fatigue jackets emblazoned with red emblems and "decided to become the police," according to Anthony Garcia, one of the first members of the occupation. "They became a real bowling team, as I call it. And they got real hot behind being policemen. They started pushing around Indians. And then they started being rough Indians."⁵⁹ The security team

quickly expanded its activities to include issuing passes for entering and exiting Alcatraz, and raiding occupiers' island homes to search for liquor or drugs. Drugs such as peyote had traditionally been used in Native American tribes for religious and medicinal purposes, but they were now officially proscribed. Several members of the occupation described "gestapo tactics" by the unconstrained security force.⁶⁰

The increasing authority of the force was part of a larger change taking place on Alcatraz early in the occupation. The original group of committed, ideological occupiers was being outnumbered by a growing population of new arrivals, many of whom the founders greeted with mixed emotion. The occupation needed to grow in order to survive, but the founders viewed many late-comers as "street people," there for a "good time" rather than a social or political cause. It was the "partying" of these newcomers that created the justification for more active "police" work. Soon, Anthony Garcia said of the occupation's founders, "We were now the minority. The people who had originally come out there were a very small group of people."⁶¹ The image of an increasingly uncommitted, irresponsible population on Alcatraz spread to Native Americans elsewhere. Lehman Brightman, who visited Alcatraz but did not participate, said that by the latter part of the occupation, "You had nothing but a bunch of people left who, some were wanted by the police, you had a lot of drunks, ne'er-do-wells and bums who were over there as a place to stay and say they were doing something for Indians when in reality all they were doing was just flopping out."⁶² Whether this was representative of the occupation or not, it clouded the image of Alcatraz as a bastion of Native American revival and pride.

Moreover, the original occupiers' discomfort with those who followed paralleled that of the original Western European settlers regarding the flood of immigrant refugees from Southern and Eastern Europe. The course of the occupation, that is, began to resemble the experience of American history as much as it did Native American history. Incorporation, the emergence of schools, newspapers and health facilities, the rise of police in response to growing numbers of immigrants who apparently did not share the founders' ideals, all pointed to a common past the occupiers shared with the larger contemporary society of which they clearly were a part.

All of this does not suggest that a Native American culture at once modern and Indian is an impossibility, or that such a culture did not exist at the time of the occupation. But a clear picture of what that culture was or could be did not emerge on Alcatraz. (This fact reflected not only the problems of integrating Indian and non-Indian culture, but also the heterogeneity of Native America itself. The significance of the lack of a single "Indian" culture common to all tribes will be discussed in the next section.) Rather, the Rock image of a separate, wholly Native American island community devoted to its particular traditions and not those of non-Indian society developed around the occupation. That image did not comport with the occupation's critical dependence on outside support, nor with the evolution of institutions on Alcatraz. The occupation was tied to mainland society in ways that belied the symbol of a pan-Indian oasis in a white desert. This was hardly a failure of the occupiers, for few if any adopted this vision of the occupation to the exclusion of others. Just as the occupiers looked backward and inward for cultural revival, they extended their gaze outward in an effective campaign for Native American rights in a modern, pluralistic society.

THE RESERVATION

When Richard Oakes looked back on the occupation four months after it ended, he titled his account, "Alcatraz is not an island."⁶³ Oakes meant that the ideas and effects of the occupation reached far beyond San Francisco Bay. But his title also suggested a recognition that cultural isolation was, in many ways, both unrealistic and undesirable. American Indians at the time of the occupation, as before and since, sought some semblance of justice, fulfillment and well-being within a society that had always been their oppressor and reluctant keeper. Over the door to the main cell block on Alcatraz, the occupiers repainted the American eagle in red, and they inscribed on its crest: "Free."⁶⁴ The national mascot remade in the image of the Indians symbolized their hope that the Anglo-American creed the eagle signified, freedom, would come to embrace Native America as well.

Beneath such grand hopes lay an essential pragmatism that was the keystone of the second primary vision of Alcatraz. This

was the most practical and prosaic of the occupation ideals: a self-professed media show in which the whole gamut of Native American grievances and demands could be aired. In particular, Alcatraz would serve as an emblem of Indian land claims nationwide. The occupiers sought to appeal to both Native Americans (through pan-Indianism) and non-Indians (through elaborate public relations) on the mainland. In this, the occupation was a startling success. Yet its effectiveness in consciousness-raising was limited by negative images of the occupation in its later days; by deep tribal distinctions; and by white America's penchant to draw its own lessons, often conservative and patronizing, from the occupation.

Instead of a declaration of independence, the fourteen students who first occupied Alcatraz in early November 1969 issued a "Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People." In its ironic invocation of the rhetoric of white conquest, the proclamation suggested one of the occupation's original aims: to draw attention to long-ignored suffering and mistreatment, appealing to contemporary notions of social justice. Alcatraz might be seen as a reservation in microcosm, a piece of documentary fiction in which the island came to stand for a struggling Native America. The proclamation read, in part,

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.⁶⁵

This conception of the occupation was uppermost in the minds of its founders when they first claimed the island: "We thought—I thought—that this would be a nice little, shall we say, publicity stunt, and that is where we wanted to take it," Anthony Garcia said.⁶⁶ As the occupation grew in size and popularity, many occupiers began to entertain loftier ideas about what they were doing. But the value of the occupation in drawing sympathy for Native American problems elsewhere was never overlooked or dismissed. In the "Planning Grant Proposal" of February 1970, Indians of All Tribes wrote, "What we want to do in the long-range view is to get some type of help for our people all across the nation."⁶⁷

The immediate issues concerning the students who initiated the occupation were those of recruiting more Native Americans for higher education and providing for the special needs of Indians in schools and cities. Richard Oakes was especially eager for a new American Indian cultural center to take the place of the one that had burned down in San Francisco's Mission District. Other students wanted recognition of Native Americans in college curricula and the kind of minority assistance already extended to black students.

These issues paled in comparison to the massive poverty and related problems of Indians elsewhere in the country, for which the occupiers also sought relief. At the time of the occupation, reservation Indians lived in terribly substandard housing, with an average family income of \$1,500 annually; infant mortality, disease epidemics and a teenage suicide rate three times the national average reduced Native Americans' life expectancy to forty-four years, compared with seventy-one years for white Americans; alcoholism was high, education was dismally low, and unemployment on reservations ranged from 20 to 80 percent.⁶⁸

Comments and written statements by the occupiers indicate their concern and identification with other contemporary Native American political battles. Their claim to Alcatraz was representative of Indian land claims in Alaska, California, Montana and New Mexico, as well as the Paiute tribe's struggle for Pyramid Lake in Nevada and the Puget Sound Indians' fight for fishing rights.⁶⁹ It was not accidental that Indians of All Tribes framed its action in a demand for land rather than abstract civil rights; the arguments bolstering their claim to the island directly related

to the primary struggles engaging Native Americans nationwide. Attorney Aubrey Grossman, in an article in the *Indians of All Tribes Newsletter*, defended the Native American position in terms calculated to have wide relevance beyond Alcatraz:

First, private property (especially in land) is sacred. The Government cannot take it away without adequate compensation, and then only for public use . . . Second, if someone takes your land you are entitled to have it back, and you need not accept its value instead—even if it is properly valued. Third, moral principles are part of the law . . . Fourth, the law is very practical. There is a principle that if legal or constitutional principles require a certain result, it will be brought about . . . Fifth, a litigant, to win, must come with “clean hands.” He must not have done anything immoral . . . Sixth, the Government has no immunity from these legal principles I have stated.⁷⁰

Grossman went on to describe the means by which Native American lands had been stolen, and he noted the government’s failure to supply adequate education, health services and other needed programs for reservation Indians. For these reasons, none of which was unique to Alcatraz or California, Grossman concluded that Native Americans ought to regain much of their land. “What I have said about the legality of the Indians’ taking Alcatraz could apply to any piece of land,” he argued.⁷¹

The occupiers were, quite explicitly, fighting other Indians’ battles by launching their own. It was therefore natural that a group called “United Indians of All Tribes,” with the support of those on Alcatraz, “invaded” Fort Lawton near Seattle, Washington, on March 8, 1970, and returned two more times in March and April, resulting in 100 arrests.⁷² Forty of the Alcatraz occupiers left the island on March 28 in order to support the Paiutes’ struggle in person.⁷³ That same month, twelve Native Americans were arrested during a sit-in at the BIA office in Alameda, California, near Alcatraz.

Indeed, the impact of Alcatraz as a “symbol of freedom” swept the nation in 1970: occupations or protests were held at BIA headquarters in seven other cities; hundreds of Pomo and Pit River Indians reoccupied territories in Northern California; Chippewa

Indians held a Coast Guard station in Wisconsin; Native Americans in Michigan claimed a lighthouse and land on Lake Superior; Indians climbed atop Mount Rushmore in South Dakota and claimed it as theirs; and a Native American group tried unsuccessfully to occupy Ellis Island in New York Harbor.⁷⁴

On the mainland, the occupiers reached out to fellow Native Americans who were urged to rally around the banner of Indian political activism, as well as non-Indians who were expected to open their eyes to the realities of the modern Indian experience. Like earlier pan-Indian movements, the occupation sought strength through unity. The Indians of All Tribes Newsletter boasted of participation by seventy-eight tribes from the United States, Canada, Central America and South America, including reservation Indians as well as urban Indians, full-bloods as well as mixed-bloods.⁷⁵ As their first major action after Thanksgiving in 1969, the occupiers convened a national inter-tribal conference on December 23 to discuss common ground. The previous day, "Radio Free Alcatraz" made its first broadcast from the island, aimed at uniting Alcatraz with Indians on the mainland. The station offered evening programming including discussion of Indian affairs as well as music, poetry and story-telling. Indians of All Tribes claimed "an Indian listening audience of approximately 100,000," broadcasting over station KPFA-FM in Berkeley and associated Pacifica Foundation stations in Los Angeles and New York.⁷⁶

Radio Free Alcatraz was not intended for Native American ears alone. As a "publicity stunt" and later as a sustained symbol of Indian needs and demands, the occupation actively appealed to a non-Indian audience. The local, national and international media therefore were given extensive access to representatives of the occupation during the first few months. Later, media presence on the island was tightly controlled in order to display the occupation in the best possible light. Anthony Garcia recalled that the public image of Alcatraz was carefully "orchestrated," and public appeals were couched in rhetoric the occupiers hoped would resonate with non-Indians. Hollywood was welcomed to Alcatraz, as were "thousands of tourists, sightseers and interested persons" who visited during the occupation, according to the occupiers' reports.⁷⁷ Visitors were taken on guided tours to enhance the public image still further.⁷⁸

Many of the visitors to and armchair observers of the occupation, both Indian and non-Indian, evidently were impressed. Alcatraz, the "reservation," jolted American awareness of Native America like a sudden earthquake in a museum diorama. In the words of Lehman Brightman, "It was a media attention-getter that was the best in the world at the time."⁷⁹ There developed, however, limitations and frustrations that confounded the elaborate media spectacle.

Despite the best efforts of its organizers, Alcatraz did not provide a wholly positive image of pan-Indian life fettered only by the destructive forces of white society. A series of problems that leaked into the media marred the occupation's public face and weakened its credibility. Lacking utilities or public maintenance, the occupation saw vandalism and garbage build up over nineteen months; violence among the occupiers damaged the image of peaceful civil disobedience; drinking was "rampant" and use of marijuana, heroin and other drugs was reported.⁸⁰ Whether these were isolated phenomena or more pervasive influences on the occupation, they detracted from the occupiers' message and diminished their public appeal. The process became a vicious cycle: reports of problems on the island caused fewer and fewer tribal people to join the occupation, and the decline in Native American support eroded the occupation's symbolic strength still further.

As early as January 1970, pictures of Thanksgiving on Alcatraz and the inter-tribal conference had given way to headlines of "dissention" and "factionalism and feuds."⁸¹ A well-publicized fire in June, which razed four historic buildings and the celebrated Alcatraz lighthouse, may have been particularly damaging to the occupation's public image (despite speculation among the occupiers that the fire was set by outside saboteurs).⁸² By the occupation's first anniversary, some former Native American supporters felt it had gone on too long and was now hindering rather than helping the American Indian cause. Adam Nordwall, one of the original leaders of the occupation and president of the United Council of American Indians in Oakland, told a reporter in April 1971,

It has served its purpose. Look at the gains Indians have made since. I don't want to say Alcatraz is done with,

but no organized Indian groups are active there. It has turned from an Indian Movement to a personality thing . . . When we occupied the island, we caught the government, and then our occupation forces caught us.⁸³

What had begun as a symbol of Native American reconstruction had become muddled by conflicting images of self-destruction. Occupiers seeking personal profit reportedly stripped the copper from electrical wiring on the island, hoping to sell it, and, near the end of the occupation, houses were torn down for use as firewood.⁸⁴

More important, perhaps, than the instances of weakness in the face of symbolic strength was the lack of the kind of massive inter-tribal unification the occupiers might have envisioned. Alcatraz did gain the enthusiastic support of many tribal people, both on and off the reservation, early in its life. However, the occupation also indicated the extreme diversity of the tribes, and the extent to which tribal identification was stronger than the collective sense of inter-tribal community. The very first council of Indians of All Tribes was dominated by Sioux, creating a rift in the occupiers' ranks along tribal lines.⁸⁵ An anthropologist who visited the occupation in December 1969 observed, "Despite the fact that Alcatraz is pan-Indian and tribe 'doesn't matter,' a lot of preliminary sorting out of people is by tribe."⁸⁶

On reservations, tribal response to the occupation never presented a unified front of support. Some tribal leaders viewed it as "un-Indian," too radical, a "young people's thing," or potentially disruptive of existing government programs benefitting the tribes. Rupert Costo reported in winter 1970, "The reactions to Alcatraz among the tribes and the people are mixed, at best . . . Many tribes and many Indian people do *not* agree with the Alcatraz occupation, nor with the Alcatraz plans."⁸⁷

Large numbers of non-Indians, nonetheless, sympathized with the occupation, especially in its early days. The civil rights movement of recent years had heightened sensitivity to minority affairs, and it made the occupation of unused government land seem relatively tame. At the same time, Americans had become enchanted with Indians. The fashion world was marketing its version of tribal garb; Arthur Kopit's Broadway play, "Indians," ran for twelve weeks in 1969; and Dustin Hoffman was filming "Little Big Man." *Time* magazine noted in February 1970, "In ways both salutary and shabby, Indians are becoming fashionable."⁸⁸

As these cultural manifestations suggest, the breadth of non-Indian society's infatuation with Native America was greater than its depth. Such was to be the case with popular support for the occupation as well. Hundreds of letters written to President Nixon and other government officials, most expressing sympathy for the occupation, offer a rough gauge of public response to the occupiers' appeals. While supportive of the Indians' claim to the island, the letters reveal far less concern for the contemporary situation of Native Americans elsewhere. Instead, many writers cited past injustices against the Indians in general terms and suggested that ceding them this small parcel of unused land would help to assuage the national guilt. It was easy for Americans to understand the occupation as a dispute over simple property rights, if one made more serious by the government's past disrespect for Indian land. Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Jorgensen of Downers Grove, Illinois, wrote the President in November 1969:

Our ancestors took enough land away from them plus our promises and treaties . . . from all that has happened to them, they deserve something *back*, to give them back their dignity, pride, and belief in the American people again . . . *Give* them Alcatraz. [italics in original]⁸⁹

In a similar vein, Mrs. Harold King Dawson of Stockton, California, wrote that same month,

I think the Indians taking Alcatraz is the most refreshing thing that has happened to this country in years, and certainly hope you will find a way to let them have it. Our treatment of the Indians has been one of the most shameful things in our history, and this is a glorious beginning to what could become something we could be proud of.⁹⁰

As the occupation wore on and appeared less "glorious" over time, the public's enthusiasm declined.

The occupation held a surprising appeal for American conservatives, if their letters of support are representative. To these admirers of the occupation, the occupiers may have seemed unthreatening in contrast to a black power movement that had turned bitter and violent. Unlike blacks, Native Americans were too small a minority to evoke real fear among whites, and their

goals hardly intruded upon whites' personal lives as did black empowerment demands. John A. Davies of Pacific Grove, California, a self-described "70 year old, 16th generation 'white' American," urged his President in December 1969 to grant the Indians Alcatraz:

These are a new—self-respecting, intelligent, well educated type of American. They have 'new hopes,' new faith in the United States. These people are not hippies or revolutionists. They are *not* waging a war or trying to undermine anything. All that they ask is the right to self determination and development.⁹¹

The relief many conservatives may have felt in finding a minority struggle they could support was reflected in the comments of Gladys M. Durbin of Corte Madera, California: "Frankly, this is the best thing that has happened since the invention of the wheel to draw attention away from the black (and white) interlopers in America trying to destroy our way of life. . . ."⁹² Fostering the impression of a benign occupation was the image of the Rock discussed earlier, symbolizing as it did a traditional way of life.

There was a tendency, then, to take the occupation less deeply and less seriously than it was intended. Just as white America had seized upon only certain elements of Indian culture in making Native America chic, so the public was able to fit Alcatraz into its preconceived romantic notions. The gravity of the occupation was dissipated by its image as a quaint and endearing sideshow. "In its news coverage of the U.S. Coast Guard's feeble attempt to blockade ships running supplies to the island, one local television station found amusement in showing their films to the musical accompaniment of U.S. cavalry bugle calls," a reporter wrote in February 1970.⁹³ Vonnie Mae Allen of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, reflected the entertainment value the occupation had unintentionally attained in her proposal to the Greater San Francisco Chamber of Commerce:

In return for the island have them put on Indian shows, the realistic kind. Have the medicine man, the Indian dances of the kind they have in Frontier Land in North Carolina at the foot of the Smokey Mountains. Each dance means something, and at the last they have a Friendship dance which they invite everyone to join in to show they are friendly Indians. They could also

“stage” a kidnapping of someone and in return the “pale face” could give something in return to get them back. They can make all sorts of pretty things for people to take home as a souvenir . . .”⁹⁴

In leaping into the national spotlight, Alcatraz may have become for many a comforting fantasy of red men and “pale face” meeting once again on the Western frontier. That fantasy was directly challenged, however, by the rhetoric of revolt that marked the third symbolic concept of the occupation.

THE PRISON

Each occupation ideal involved a different image of the change envisioned in Indian-white relations: in the first, it was Native American withdrawal from white society; in the second, it was white accommodation and acceptance of American Indians; in the third, it was Indians seizing control—not receding into a pre-surrender past, but refighting the war and emerging victorious. The history of Native American relations with whites was to be turned on its head. A *Detroit News* reporter wrote of the occupation in December 1969,

History would seem to dictate that they will lose. But the Indians, from the articulate and highly respected Oakes to the most humble follower, insist that history has been reversed.⁹⁵

Alcatraz seemed an appropriate setting for such a revolt. The prison epitomized white power through incarceration, a pattern Native Americans recognized in their communal past. In rhetoric and imagery, the occupiers broke the prison bars. The force of that symbolic act carried with it a larger social message, an identification of the occupation with the widespread spirit of societal revolution. This most radical symbol of Alcatraz ran counter to the conservative instincts of many Native Americans and the traditionalism of the cultural revival the occupiers envisioned. It also alarmed non-Indians who otherwise might have seen the occupation as harmless and peaceful.

American history was a source of continued shame for many Native Americans, for whom surrender rather than emancipation had been the formative experience of the past hundred years.

Their relationship with non-Indian society remained in 1969 essentially as it had been a century earlier, that of warden and ward. Historian Richard Drinnon notes the prison pall that hung over the reservations in a 1987 book discussing Indian-white relations in the 1950s; the BIA Director of "termination" and "relocation," Drinnon writes, "administered reservations as 'something akin to large detention camps,' and treated the inmates as though they were savages."⁹⁶ Native Americans thus continued to view themselves as a conquered people living amidst the conquerors. Anthony Garcia explained,

Indians don't see themselves in the same plight as blacks and Mexicans, as far as being suppressed . . . They see themselves as losers. Losers is the key word.⁹⁷

The occupiers saw Alcatraz, the ultimate symbol of white incarceration, as representative of tribal people's imprisonment and defeat. It was a nineteenth-century photograph of Native Americans imprisoned on the island that first stirred Garcia to think of retaking it. Richard Oakes wrote,

Alcatraz was a place where thousands of people had been imprisoned, some of them Indians. We sensed the spirits of the prisoners . . . Jailbirds, wards of the government, prisoners of war . . . what's the difference.⁹⁸

Imprisonment remained a powerful metaphor for the contemporary Native American situation at the time of the occupation, as evidenced in this comment by Indians of All Tribes:

Many Indian men are in prisons now and a few years from now, there will be even more there. The percentage is very high, and it's wiping out our race.⁹⁹

In taking over the prison, the occupiers found an ideal symbol of rebellion against their keepers. This was no sacred tribal hunting ground being reclaimed; it was the very institution whites had built to symbolize their authority and control. The first fourteen students to occupy the island made full use of this irony, offering a "treaty" to its former guardians:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars (24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of similar land about 300 years ago . . . We will further guide the [white] in-

habitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers from their savage and unhappy state.¹⁰⁰

While such rhetoric surely was tailored for publicity purposes, it reflected a real sense among the occupiers that Alcatraz embodied power. The "Bureau of Caucasian Affairs" and the red armbands of its security team were but two examples of the symbolic reversal of control, seen as well in the more purposeful vandalism of the island. Vandalism itself was a way of asserting command over the white prison: the sign warning, "Keep Off U.S. Property," was changed to read, "Keep Off Indian Property"; the prison cells were inscribed with the names of President Nixon, Vice-President Spiro Agnew, Governor Ronald Reagan, Andrew Jackson and others; other revealing graffiti included, "Christianity is a white man's religion," "CUSTER HAD IT COMING," and "THIS IS MY LAND."¹⁰¹

From the premier American prison, Alcatraz was made into "a powerful symbol of liberation" for Native Americans. So radical was the change in the island's meaning that Oakes recalled an elderly Indian man greeting Alcatraz in this way: "When he stepped up onto the dock, he was overjoyed. He stood there for a minute and then said, 'At last, I am free!'"¹⁰² La Nada Means, another leader of the occupation, expressed a similar sense of victory: "Indians never had prisons—yet here, in this white man's prison, we have found freedom for the first time."¹⁰³

With the newly-acquired armor of the Alcatraz prison, the most militant occupiers looked forward to Native Americans finally taking part in the social revolution of the times. In dramatic contrast to the conservatism of much of the occupation's imagery and ideology, some participants saw it as, in the words of Adam Nordwall, "a grand-scale attack on 'the whole system that has foisted injustice on the American Indian.'"¹⁰⁴ The "system" meant much more than the BIA or inadequate attention to Native American needs. In this vision of the occupation, Alcatraz was the first major Indian contribution to a vast societal upheaval. Shirley Keith said in January 1970,

. . . Revolution is in the air and we are not immune to it. This entire generation is involved. First there was

the civil rights movement and then the Vietnam War. All these things affected us and seemed to bring our outrage to a boil.¹⁰⁵

The possession of a federal prison, and of Alcatraz in particular, assured the occupiers that their movement could alter the shape of non-Indian society as well as their own. The stakes might be far greater than Native American rights. Medicine man Bill Schweigman, "A.K.A. Chief Eagle Feather," expressed confidence in the ultimate victory of the Indian revolution: "Purple is a new color for a new movement which is uniting all the Indians from the West to the East . . . The stars in the U.S. flag may be changed to purple, it will be brought up in Congress."¹⁰⁶

Such idealism was limited, however, by the competing impulses underlying the occupation. The prison uprising image of Alcatraz did not easily coexist with either of the other two fundamental visions. The sense of participation in a struggle transcending Indian America did not fit well with cultural isolationism, and the radical means of modern ethnic empowerment hardly accorded with the ends of returning to "old ways." Many Native Americans, both on and off Alcatraz, drew a wide line between their own position and that of black Americans; tribal people, it was felt, did not engage in social confrontation of the kind that black protest increasingly entailed. To these Indians, Alcatraz could not and should not be seen as an uprising against white society. Thus, while the themes of the Rock and reservation run through virtually all of the occupiers' actions and statements, only a minority appears to have been motivated by the ideal of prison revolt.

To the extent that the prison image became associated with the meaning of the occupation, it may have diminished the occupation's popularity in the Native American mainstream. The division between radical urban activists and more traditional reservation Indians affected Native American politics both before and after the occupation. It was an important reason behind the reluctance of many Native American leaders to give the occupation their wholehearted support. Lehman Brightman, well acquainted with this situation through his own activism, noted,

Tribal leaders at the time and a lot of other people who later got involved weren't ready at the time. They hadn't progressed to the point where they realized that

what we were saying was true . . . The squeaky wheel gets the oil. The only way you're going to get anything is to get out and protest and raise hell.¹⁰⁷

Public protest, of course, was a point of commonality between the ideals of Alcatraz as a platform for Native American causes and as a symbol of overthrowing white control. But while much of the impetus behind Alcatraz lay in an appeal to non-Indian sensibilities, the revolutionary rhetoric tended to distance the occupation from liberals and conservatives alike. It is difficult to conduct an "orchestrated" public relations campaign while beating the drums of revolt. Whites shocked by the symbolic defiance reacted with predictable dismay. A *San Francisco Examiner* commentator took the prison rebellion at face value in a hyperbolic article entitled, "The Alcatraz 'Invasion,'" calling it part of "the scenario which has been written for the destruction of the American social order . . . This Alcatraz escapade is just one small item on a long agenda."¹⁰⁸

The same writer noted a salient feature of this radical vision of the occupation, that of force. While never becoming violent in its conflict with government authorities, the occupation did suggest that Native Americans' disputes with white society must be resolved outside of the law. Land claims were to be validated through open rebellion rather than through litigation or negotiation. Attorney Aubrey Grossman encouraged the occupation's founders to feel restrained by white law; the occupation had a law of its own.¹⁰⁹ The establishment of an extra-legal security force on the island reinforced the message that non-Indian law was hereby overruled. It was this aspect of the occupation that occasioned the greatest opposition from non-Indian observers, angered by the "mob" of "Indian renegades" run amok.¹¹⁰ Wrote the *Examiner* commentator: "To encourage physical seizure of property now is madness. After Alcatraz, what next? Golden Gate Park? Nob Hill?"¹¹¹ Citizens who wrote in support of the occupation often bracketed their endorsement in language that implicitly returned power to the government to "give" Alcatraz to its occupiers rather than have it taken away. Senator George Murphy, a California Republican and member of the Subcommittee on Indian Education, voiced his reluctance to allow Alcatraz to set a precedent for Indian-white relations: "I would hope we wouldn't get a whole rash of these, because if you come down to it somebody's likely to claim the whole United States."¹¹²

The senator's comments were more insightful than he may have realized. In making their various claims on Alcatraz—both symbolic and otherwise—the occupiers were in fact laying claim to an America stolen from under them. These three visions of the occupation were inextricably bound up with the personal lives and aspirations of its participants. But whether as a cultural revival, platform for protest or prison revolt, the occupation meant more to its participants and supporters than a mere dozen acres of unused land on the Pacific Coast. Alcatraz was a collective expression of modern Native Americans seeking control over their lives in a society that had long before robbed them of such control. Its success or failure must be evaluated in terms of how meaningful and genuine that expression was, as well as its effectiveness in achieving its goals.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Beneath a front-page headline declaring, "The Dream Is Over," a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter sketched the final images of the occupation after the last of the occupiers were gone: "More than a score newsmen, in a tour that was more like an autopsy, found an unrelieved vista of squalor, filth, systematic pilfering and mindless destruction." All that remained of the Indians' nineteen-month stay, it appeared, was a charred island ankle-deep in rubbish and broken glass.¹¹³ Had the dream indeed vanished with the Indian presence on Alcatraz, or had the occupation left a legacy of lasting value?

The difficulty of providing an answer lies in the complexities and ambiguities of the dream itself. Two of the three underlying visions of the occupation comprised a new spirit for Native Americans—an internal, psychological change more than an external, tangible one. These were the alternate images of the Rock and the prison, of cultural revival and radical revolt. Both appear fanciful when viewed as pragmatic programs: no pan-Indian island nation developed on the soil of past glory; nor did Alcatraz signal a general call to arms, even within the bounds of nonviolent civil disobedience. But these were not pragmatic programs so much as uplifting ideals, stars upon which Native America might fix its compass and thereby navigate its mundane realities. The question, then, is not whether the occupation reached such

celestial shores, but whether those stars shed light and hope. This they surely did.

"No way could it have been a failure," Shirley Guavara said of the occupation. "It made us feel proud of who we were."¹¹⁴ Pride is the common element of both Rock and revolt. It is an elusive, amorphous goal for any action: the restoration of self-respect to, and by, a disparate community accustomed to its role as passive victim rather than active player in American society. Pride in one's native identity cannot be granted by benevolent outsiders; it must come from within. It emerged in this case from an event of great defiance and bravado, an action and a place truly defined by Native Americans. That spirit could not be deadened once given birth—not even by the occupation's demise. Anthony Garcia noted,

Every Indian, the minute Alcatraz started, let their hair grow—they had had butch haircuts . . . Indians grew their hair long and dared people to look at them.¹¹⁵

Alcatraz was an exercise in collective therapy for psychic wounds far more than it was a political or social platform.

That is not to say that the Rock and the prison overthrown were simply appealing and healing images: these symbols had real pragmatic dimensions, despite their dreamlike nature. A new awareness was born in Native America and non-Indian society that Indians would no longer be pawns of public policy. Relations were cemented between tribes and tribal people in an unprecedented development of communal self-empowerment. Rupert Costo reported,

A broad base of support has been developed through the Alcatraz event, comparable to and perhaps even surpassing that won by the Black people in their long and arduous civil rights struggle.¹¹⁶

Practical gains were more evident from the third ideal of Alcatraz, for the reservation in microcosm explicitly targeted the tangible physical effects of mistreatment and insensitivity in society at large. The starburst of media attention generated by the occupation achieved at least part of the occupiers' purpose: Indians and non-Indians took notice, even if they might have drawn messages different from those intended. Native America's political response has been described above, including a long list

of protests and occupations by tribal people nationwide. On the local level, Indian activists prodded the government to build the first university specializing in American Indian and Chicano Studies, on United States Army land near Davis, California. Other such colleges have been established since then near several reservations.¹¹⁷

Non-Indian America's response to the occupation is difficult to isolate and measure. But certainly President Nixon had the surge of Native American activism in mind when he proposed a variety of reforms in a July 1970 speech on Indian policy. The conservative chief executive called for the restoration of tribal lands, improved education and health programs for Native Americans, legislation making it easier for Indians to obtain loans and economic aid to urban Indians. Condemning the "suffocating paternalism" of previous federal policy, Nixon echoed the rhetoric of the occupation: "The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions."¹¹⁸ However sincere or disingenuous the President's words were, his recognition of the most fundamental demand of the occupation—self-determination—testified to the newfound power of Native Americans in fomenting and shaping public discussion.

In the face of such advances, the occupation culminated with what appeared to be a giant step backward. The federal government took back Alcatraz, and the Indians received not an acre of land, not a dollar of federal aid. To many, this seemed to erase what gains had been made and to dash earlier hopes for the occupation to have a direct, concrete effect. Alcatraz, Lehman Brightman concluded, turned out to be a "fiasco"; the occupiers should have taken what they could have gotten early in the occupation, when the government was eager to negotiate a settlement.¹¹⁹ In the final months, the occupiers as well may have come to see Alcatraz as containing within its prison walls all the meaning of their action. Loss of the island would mean total defeat. La Nada Means wrote in January 1971,

We can not let Alcatraz die because just as it was symbolic in reawakening Indian consciousness and bring [sic] attention to the Indian people, so it will be symbolic of our death if it should die.¹²⁰

In fact, by the end of the occupation very little was at stake for Indian America in the fate of the few people remaining on Alcatraz. Its symbolic power was such that Alcatraz itself was now unimportant, merely the emptied stage for the high drama of the early days. "We won in the first week," said Anthony Garcia. "Everything else was gravy."¹²¹

In what sense had the occupiers "won"? The occupation was a triumph by its very existence and endurance—not essentially a means to an end, whether that end lay in acquisition of a piece of land or in less prosaic ambitions, but an end in itself. As a conduit for change, Alcatraz was ambiguous at best, bitterly disappointing at worst. But as an expressive forum for Native Americans on and off the island, the occupation succeeded beyond the starriest dreams of its founders. It said as much about the reaches of Indian imagination as it did about the limits of Native American reality.

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NOTES

1. U.S. Department of War, *Report of Secretary of War*, Report of Brigadier General O. O. Howard, Vol. 1 (1877), 630, quoted in Helen Addison Howard and Dan L. McGrath, *War Chief Joseph* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1941), 282.

2. William Hedgepeth, "Alcatraz: The Indian Uprising that Worked," *Look*, 22 June 1970, 44-45.

3. "The Angry American Indian: Starting Down the Protest Trail," *Time*, 9 February 1970, 15.

4. Michael Dorris, "For the Indians, No Thanksgiving," *New York Times*, 24 November 1988, A23.

5. Rupert Costo, "Alcatraz," *The Indian Historian* 3 (Winter 1970): 10.
6. Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971), viii.
7. *San Francisco Examiner* (hereafter referred to as "Examiner"), 29 November 1969, and Peter Collier, "The Red Man's Burden," *Ramparts*, February 1970, 27. (Estimates of the number of people residing on Alcatraz at any one time during the occupation varied substantially from source to source. This may reflect, in part, the difficulty of taking an accurate census with limited media access to the island, rapid turnover in the occupiers' forces and large numbers of visitors coming and going.)
8. Indians of All Tribes, leaflet, n.d., File "Alcatraz," Native American Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter referred to as "NAS File").
9. Linda Aranaydo, interview in Berkeley, California, 21 October 1987. In addition to using newspaper and magazine articles, original documents from the occupation, secondary sources and government records in researching this paper, I interviewed several participants in and observers of the occupation. Their insights, while essential to the interpretation of Alcatraz presented here, are inherently subjective and limited by personal experience. This paper shares those limitations; interviews with other occupiers and observers might have changed or augmented my analysis.
10. Terry Wilson, interview in Berkeley, California, 14 October 1987.
11. Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon Books, 1970), 174.
12. This discussion of early twentieth-century pan-Indianism is based largely on Hertzberg's *The Search For An American Indian Identity*. (Also, just as the early pan-Indianists responded to the threat of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, a full-fledged legislative attack on the tribe itself, Indian activists of the 1960s came on the heels of the Termination Acts of the previous decade, a similar attempt to legislate Indian distinctions out of existence.)
13. Shirley Guavara, interview in Berkeley, California, 11 September 1987.
14. Aranaydo interview.
15. Erwin Thompson, *The Rock: A History of Alcatraz Island, 1847-1972* (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Historic Preservation Division, 1979), 463, 465.
16. Sioux Treaty of 1868, quoted in *The Indian Historian* 3 (Winter 1970): 14 (Article 6, paragraph 4): ". . . any male Indians, over eighteen years of age, of any band or tribe that is or shall hereafter become a party to this treaty, who now is or shall hereafter become a resident or occupant of any reservation or Territory not included in the tract of country designated and described in this treaty for the permanent home of the Indians, which is not mineral land, nor reserved by the United States for special purposes other than Indian occupation, and who shall have made improvements thereon of the value of two hundred dollars or more, and continuously occupied the same as a homestead for the term of three years, shall be entitled to receive from the United States a patent for one hundred and sixty acres of land including his said improvements. . . ."
17. Thompson, 465-466.

18. Deloria, "The Country Was a Lot Better Off When The Indians Were Running It," in Josephy, *Red Power*, 236.
19. Anthony Garcia, interview in Berkeley, California, 16 September 1987.
20. *San Francisco Chronicle* (hereafter to be referred to as "Chronicle"), 21 November 1969, and Collier, 27.
21. Garcia interview.
22. Guavara interview, and *Chronicle*, 28 November 1969.
23. Thomas Hannon to "Commissioner, PMDS," 20 February 1970, Alcatraz Disposal Case Records, Records of the Property Management and Disposal Service, Region 9, Real Property Division, Record Group 291, National Archives, San Bruno, California (hereafter to be referred to as "Archives File"), Box 6.
24. Collier, 27.
25. *Indians of All Tribes Newsletter* (hereafter to be referred to as "Newsletter") 3, n.d., 5, NAS File.
26. Costo, 10, and *Chronicle*, 21 November 1970.
27. John Trudell, quoted in Associated Press report, *Escondido* (Calif.) *Daily Times-Advocate*, 16 March 1971.
28. Hedgepeth, 44-45.
29. *Newsletter* 1:1.
30. *San Rafael* (Calif.) *Pacific Sun*, 14 January 1970.
31. Peter blue cloud, ed., *Alcatraz Is Not An Island* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1972), 20-21.
32. Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (April 1956): 264-266.
33. Josephy, *Now That the Buffalo's Gone: A Study of Today's American Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 8.
34. Deloria, *Custer Sins*, 34.
35. *Newsletter* 1:10.
36. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement," 25 February 1970, NAS File.
37. Indians of All Tribes to "Indians of North America," 16 December 1969, in Josephy, *Red Power*, 188.
38. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement," and *Newsletter* 1:3.
39. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement."
40. Indians of All Tribes, Inc., "Planning Grant Proposal To Develop An All Indian University And Cultural Complex on Indian Land, Alcatraz," February 1970, NAS File.
41. Richard Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not An Island," *Ramparts*, October 1972, 35. Peter Collier wrote of Alcatraz: "Although certain spokemen had been appointed, this new tribe was officially leaderless. . . . But it was clear to me that . . . Oakes was not only a leader of the movement, but also probably the personification of the spirit of the island." Collier, "The Only Good Indian," *Ramparts*, October 1972, 36. When Oakes's thirteen-year-old daughter died in January 1970 after falling down a staircase on Alcatraz, it was a crucial blow to the occupation; Oakes himself recalled, "It was like a symbol of all the doubts we had hidden from ourselves during the Alcatraz experience." Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not An Island," 40. He left the island a few days later, in what was arguably the beginning of the end for the occupation.
42. Collier, 27.

43. Aranaydo interview.
44. *San Rafael* (Calif.) *Pacific Sun*, 14 January 1970.
45. *Newsletter* 3:6.
46. Indians of All Tribes, "Grant Proposal," 6.
47. *Newsletter* 4, n.d., inside back cover, Box 12, Archives File.
48. Aranaydo interview.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement."
51. Lehman Brightman, interview in El Cerrito, California, 9 October 1987.
52. E.g., Indians of All Tribes, "A Gentle Caress For Our Earth Mother," in *blue cloud*, 15.
53. *blue cloud*, 28.
54. Wilson interview.
55. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement," and "General Fact Sheet," n.d., NAS File.
56. *Newsletter* 1:8.
57. *Ibid.*, inside front cover.
58. *Ibid.*, 9.
59. Garcia, interview in Berkeley, California, 6 October 1987.
60. Justine Buckskin, interview in Berkeley, California, 7 September 1987.
61. Garcia interview, 6 October 1987.
62. Brightman interview.
63. Oakes, 35.
64. *Examiner*, 24 July 1971.
65. *Newsletter* 1:2.
66. Garcia interview, 16 September 1987.
67. Indians of All Tribes, "Grant Proposal," 6.
68. Collier, 30, and "Angry Indian," 16-17. The occupiers surely could find considerable motivation for their cause today: Department of the Interior figures for reservation Indians in 1987 indicated 41 percent were below the poverty level compared with 12 percent for the nation as a whole, 58 percent of males were unemployed compared with 8 percent nationally, and 27 percent had less than an elementary education compared with 10 percent of all Americans. *The Wall Street Journal*, "Troubled Minority," 2 February 1987.
69. "Angry Indian," 18.
70. *Newsletter* 3:3.
71. *Ibid.*, 4.
72. *Ibid.*, 1, and Josephy, *Buffalo's Gone*, 230.
73. *Newsletter* 3:9.
74. Josephy, *Buffalo's Gone*, 230.
75. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement."
76. *Newsletter* 1:10.
77. *Chronicle*, 29 November 1969.
78. U.S., General Services Administration, memo from Thomas N. Scott, realty officer, Real Property Division, Property Management and Disposal Service, 17 February 1970, Box 6, Archives File.
79. Brightman interview.
80. U.S. General Services Administration, memo from Thomas Scott, 27

February 1970, Box 6, Archives File: "The Indians are apparently demolishing Building 'A' . . . Garbage increases daily. Flies and insects are becoming a serious problem"; U.S., General Services Administration, sworn statement by Don W. Carroll, Alcatraz caretaker, 28 May 1970, 10, Box 6, Archives File: "There are one or two fights a day between Indians"; Garcia interview, 6 October 1987; Carroll statement, 3-4.

81. *Chronicle*, 7 January 1970 and 8 January 1970.
82. *Chronicle*, 3 June 1970.
83. *Eugene Register Guard*, 11 April 1971.
84. Bucksin interview and Guavara interview.
85. Garcia interview, 6 October 1987.
86. Byron Harvey, "Alcatraz Diary—December, 1969," *Indian Community Action* (Arizona State University), February 1970, 6.
87. Costo, 11.
88. "Angry Indian," 15.
89. Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Jorgensen to President Nixon, 27 November 1969, Box 5, Archives File.
90. Mrs. Harold King Dawson to President Nixon, 26 November 1969, Box 5, Archives File.
91. John A. Davies to President Nixon, 22 December 1969, Box 5, Archives File.
92. William F. Durbin and Gladys M. Durbin to President Nixon, 2 December 1969, Box 5, Archives File.
93. Collier, 27.
94. Vonnie Mae Allen to the Greater San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, 9 January 1970, Box 5, Archives File.
95. *Detroit News*, 7 December 1969.
96. Richard Drinnon, *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Meyer and American Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 239.
97. Garcia interview, 16 September 1987.
98. Oakes, 40.
99. Indians of All Tribes, "Grant Proposal," 7-8.
100. *Newsletter* 1:2.
101. Collier, 27; Herb Caen, column, *Chronicle*, 25 August 1970; Harvey, 1; Hedgepeth, 44.
102. Collier, 27; Oakes, 40.
103. Caen, column, *Chronicle*, 25 August 1970.
104. *Chronicle*, 29 November 1969.
105. San Rafael (Calif.) *Pacific Sun*, 14 January 1970.
106. Indians of All Tribes, "Statement."
107. Brightman interview.
108. George N. Crocker, "The Alcatraz 'Invasion,'" *Examiner*, 1 December 1969.
109. Garcia interview, 16 September 1987.
110. James F. Malone to Thomas Hannon, 13 December 1969, Box 5, Archives File.
111. Crocker.
112. *Examiner*, 29 November 1969.

113. *Chronicle*, 14 June 1971.
114. Guavara interview.
115. Garcia interview, 6 October 1987.
116. Costo, 12.
117. Aranaydo interview.
118. U.S. President, Address to Congress, 8 July 1970, Box 12, Archives File.
119. Brightman interview.
120. La Nada Means to Indians of All Tribes and Bay Area Native American Council, 20 January 1971, NAS File.
121. Garcia interview, 16 September 1987.