The American Indian Movement (as Portrayed by the Media)

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Argument

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was a radical activist group dedicated to Indian civil rights and self-determination through the use of the media. AIM also sought to raise awareness of Indian communities and their struggle through confrontational politics, like occupations. AIM worked to address the common needs of Native people and to preserve Indian identity and individuality. AIM's goal was to show their struggle from a Native point of view, in hope of educating Americans about their situation. The movement emerged to raise consciousness so Indians could connect with one another, to share awareness of similar problems. This was one of the first Pan-Indian movements: the recognition of broader commonalities, not just on specific tribes. All tribes united because they recognized they were fighting a common enemy in their struggle for self-determination and identity. AIM, though, was a movement rather than an organization and was in no position to deliver. “AIM is the People,” as Peltier states. Every Indian activist and fighter that ever lived is part of AIM because they all belong to each other.

Paley Center for Media Findings on Wounded Knee (1973)

The arrival at Wounded Knee February 27, 1973 by supporters and members of AIM was to protest the regime of the “Hitler of the Pine Ridge Reservation,” Dick Wilson and to raise awareness of Native issues. AIM and other Indians were struggling to assert their sovereignty and take land as much as they could and hold it for as long as they could. The broadcaster in APR called the occupiers, “goons with weapons raising hell.” AIM was not destroying tribal government or going against Wilson, as US media made it seem; rather, their goal was to bring to the forefront the issue of treaty rights and talk about treaties to tribal government. Indians compared this 1973 occupation to the Vietnam War because of the hectic, steady, automatic weapon fire. “Americans never learned from Vietnam and I understand why the Vietnamese win,” an Indian claimed. Indians fought from their hearts, even a threat of death did not stop them, like the Vietnamese. The Native people were sympathetic with the Vietnamese because they felt colonized by the US government as well. “The Indian–white, even Native–Native, relationship referred to Wounded Knee as a ‘show,’ to support the falsity of the protest. The media called them “thugs,” “commies,” and “invaders.” They were beaten and met with violence. They wanted to prove they were survivors. New York Times displayed Wounded Knee across the front page, “Armed Indians Seiz Wounded Knee and Hold Hostages,” inferring Indians are trace-ous and aggressive. The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, however, discussed the demands of Russell Means, giving the movement a Native voice.

On May 9, 1973, the protestors finally submitted to the US officials. When the stand down took place, people fled Wounded Knee while fed's trashed houses and delicately brought in the media. The media took pictures and Indians held themselves blame for the destruction. This is another attempt at trying to comply with white expectations for Indians as savage, heartless, and destructive. Indians “instilled a seed of hope” in disheartened people, so it blossomed into something that would never disappear. The radio broadcast ends with an Indian song for Wounded Knee, “some day when a thunder bird comes after you, do not run, rise up…” Indians had strong beliefs in their ancestors and they learned if they were in a stormy situation, they must face it and rise above it, rather than run from it. Wounded Knee was a demonstration of freedom Native people never felt before. The protestors in the occupation felt pride in themselves and were willing to die because they believed so strongly in the cause. Americans labeled the 1973 Wounded Knee massacre as the “last battle” because there were no more concerns about Indians after that closing of the frontier. The idea Indians were beginning to disappear was alive and well in the culture in the late 1960s. Native activists, like AIM, used new militancy to show Indians were back up, alive, and ready to take on American society. AIM worked to address the continuing oppression. There are many controversial opinions on the imprisonment of Peltier. “To some, Leonard Peltier is a hero; to others, a political prisoner; and a modern symbol of centuries of discrimination, persecution, and marginalization” of Indians by the federal government. To others, Peltier is a “cold-blooded, amoral, murdering murderer who cleverly manipulated the media and played upon public sympathy to create a fictitious, large-than-life persona.” An entire website is devoted to ensure racism against Peltier remains in prison. There is a bias on the Indian phrasing, “in the spirit of Crazy Horse,” when it states, “in the spirit of Colyer and Williams,” the two FBI agents who were murdered on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Leonard Peltier

In 1977, Leonard Peltier, the longest held Native American political prisoner in the US, received a life sentence for an alleged first-degree murder of two FBI agents. He was wrongly convicted for the crimes committed by AIM and their followers. The trial was framed and how the media depicted activists, like Russell Means and Leonard Peltier. AIM worked to establish their humanity and prove they existed and were capable of self-determination through confrontational politics.

Occupations

Alcatraz Island (1969)

According to scholar Jason Heppler, the publicity generated by the Alcatraz Island Occupation proved to be the first successful attempt to reclaim destiny by the usage of confrontation politics. In 1969, Native Americans took over Alcatraz Island, off the coast of San Francisco, as a Native cultural center that would display the calumny of reservation life the whites had imposed on them. Indians demanded the US government honor its treaties and wished to show the world they have the right to rule themselves. They desired to reclaim the land that was stolen from them. In a KQED news report from Alcatraz on November 24, 1969, Native American Richard Oakes told reporters, “We’d like an end to injustice.” And I think this here—meaning Alcatraz—is a positive step in that direction. If they’re going to treat us like this, then we’re going to do what we have to do. We’re going to do something to deliver. “AIM is the People,” as Peltier states. Every Indian activist and fighter that ever lived is part of AIM because they all belong to each other.

Columbus Day Parade (2007)

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John Trudell

According to Dennis Banks, “Indians wind up in the slammer because they are Indians. Not for race— and cannot pull an attorney,” lead to prison. Dennis Banks read pages on Indian history, the American Indian Movement was a “reaction to the realization of centuries of discrimination, deprivation, racism, human rights, and treaty rights” by the United States. Indians were murdered and led to prison. Dennis Banks followed through with his commitment to himself on Wounded Knee. Indians were murdered and led to prison. The media calls them “thugs,” “commies,” and “invaders.” Indians were beaten and met with violence. They wanted to prove they were survivors. The media called them “thugs,” “commies,” and “invaders.” Indians were beaten and met with violence. They wanted to prove they were survivors. The media called them “thugs,” “commies,” and “invaders.” Indians were beaten and met with violence. They wanted to prove they were survivors. The

Russell Means

An AIM leader, Russell Means, was seen as controversial and volatile. He authored everything white people felt the adversaries viewed and preserved about AIM, AIM stood for all Native Americans and their political and social issues. AIM was the first to organize publications and newspapers that distributed good information to Native Americans, labeling AIM as a “band of malcontents.”

Columbus Day Parade (2007)

AIM leaders including Russell Means, were arrested for their use of political theater and non-violent protest in this concert, similar tactics used in earlier occupations. AIM took hold of the Washington building Bureau of Indian Affairs. They hoped to meet with the government to discuss issues and establish a committee to examine treaty violations. The guards, however, used military tactics to attack and arrest women and Elders, transforming the situation into a “tense confrontation.” This was used to AIM’s advantage because police and US marshals interfered as they sacked the infrastructure. The public was misinformed as to what happened and why. Indians were portrayed as “thugs,” “hoodlums,” and “violent militants” who “backed” the building. AIM was classified as an “extremist organization” and the FBI labeled the leaders on the Trail of Broken Treaties as AIM “agitators” and “key extremists.” AIM’s reputation suffered from the newspapers; reporters distinguished good information from bad Indians, labeling AIM as a “band of malcontents.”

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Conclusion

Throughout history, Native Americans were marginalized and many assumed they were on the verge of disappearance. American history was told from the vantage point of the victors, without a Native perspective. History has a cause and effect to it, and the media was responsible for the “sacked buildings” because of their aggressive nature, rather than reasoning behind it. America neglected Indians unless they staged takeovers, like Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and the Trail of Broken Treaties to build an “Indian future.” Tragedies, AIM stressors, such as Wounded Knee, are not just an Indian, but an American tragedy as well. America lives with the pain of the injustices and it learns nothing from it. The challenge is to decipher the truth.