

## The American Indian Movement (as Portrayed by the Media)

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## **ARGUMENT**

Mass media became the vehicle by which to portray the political and social issues facing Native Americans through AIM's usage of devastating Indian events, like Wounded Knee. The American Indian Movement attempted to control the way their image 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.

## WHAT IS AIM?

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was a radical activist group dedicated to Indian civil rights and self-determination through use of the media. AIM also attempted to establish American recognition of Indians and their treaty rights 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 in a similarly unjust situation in search of 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.

## **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, demanding it as a Native cultural center that would display the calamity 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—manning Alcatraz—is a positive step in that direction. If they're going to treat us separately, we'll remain separately."

### Trail of Broken Treaties (1972)

In 1972, AIM brought their grievances to the US capital in a mass demonstration for rights, known as the Trail of Broken Treaties. 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 against the 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 "sacked" 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 Indians from bad Indians, 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-violence in this protest, similar tactics used in earlier occupations. AIM repeatedly captured media attention after fake blood and dismembered baby dolls were poured in the parade route. Christopher Columbus statues were also vandalized because Indians believed Columbus practiced genocide against their people. The baby doll parts were to symbolize the injustice and violence Indian ancestors faced. The photos used in regard to the event displayed the violence the police used against the peaceful Indian protestors. AIM made use of devastating historical events, like Christopher Columbus' arrival, in order to gain support for their movement from the American public. An activist, Glen Morris, makes the point to say AIM's goal is to make history not just sit back and watch it happen. Peaceful protest was met with "painful holds," arrests, and tear gas was used on the "longhair troublemakers." This exemplifies how media coverage can play on people's emotions by seeing non-violent Indians met with violence.

# 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 alternatives 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 won," an Indian claimed. Indians fought from their hearts; even a threat of death did not stop them, like the Vietnamese. The Natives were sympathizing with the Vietnamese because they felt colonized by the US government as well. Some whites, even Natives themselves, referred to Wounded Knee as a "show," to suggest 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 Seize Wounded Knee and Hold Hostages," inferring Indians are treacherous 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 feds trashed houses and deliberately brought in the media. The media took pictures and Indians caught the 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 the problem and rise above it, rather than run from it. Wounded Knee offered a taste 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 1890 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 1890s. Native activists, like AIM, used new militancy to show Indians were back up, alive, and ready to take on establishment. Indians, however, knew neither the 1890 massacre nor the 1973 occupation was the last battle. They wanted to see positive changes because people wanted to improve lives and the changes must come from the Natives themselves in order to change their own history. AIM was a "powerless public that mobilized to rewrite its past."

### Russell Means

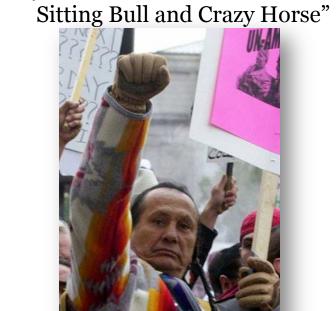
An AIM recruit, Russell Means, was fearless and volatile; he stood for everything that white people and the authorities feared and resented about AIM. He was an expert for staging demonstrations that attracted the press coverage. He epitomized the radical nature of AIM and was attractive to the supporters of AIM's militancy.

"A magnet for trouble"

"One of the biggest, baddest, meanest, angriest, most famous American Indian activist..."

"Strapping, and ruggedly handsome in buckskins, with a scarred face, piercing dark eyes and raven braids that dangled to the waist"

"Arguably the nation's best-known Indian since



### JOHN TRUDELL

He published poetry, often about protest of corporate power and government oppression.

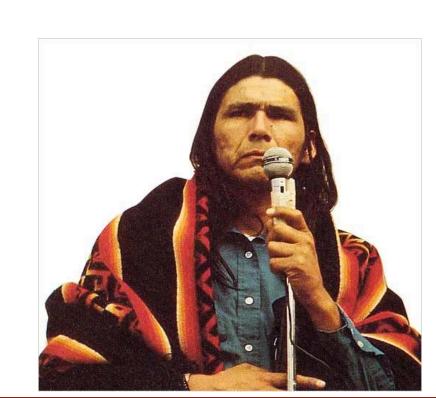
"most eloquent speaker in the Movement"

"outspoken advocate"



### DENNIS BANKS

According to Dennis Banks, "Indians wind up in the slammer because they are Indians...too poor to raise bail...and cannot pay for an attorney." While in prison, Dennis Banks read papers on Indian history, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and Black Power, sparking his desire for a movement to address "social reform, human rights, and treaty rights" for his people. In 1968, Banks was released from prison and followed through with his commitment to himself on creating an Indian movement. Banks encouraged his people to be where there was injustice and confront it. He believed AIM appealed to the media to let America know the reasons for the occupations and what their demands were.





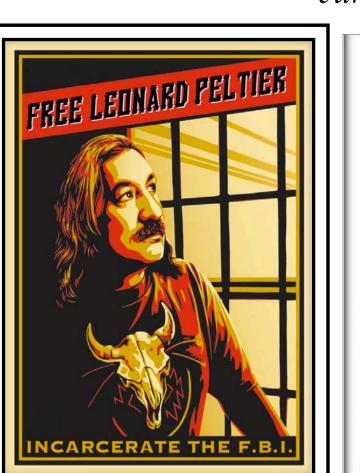




## LEONARD PELTIER

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 in 1975 for killing them on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The trial for Peltier consisted of numerous documented constitutional violations, intimidation and coercion of government witnesses, falsifying information, and manufactured evidence. Although he prosecutor admitted, "we don't know who killed the agents," Mr. Peltier was denied the right to present a defense. Peltier's voice, like most indigenous peoples', has been silenced. At Peltier's trial, government prosecutors reenacted a scene in which an FBI agent whom already had been shot had his hands up in surrender but was shot and killed anyway by Peltier. This gives people the impression Natives are heartless and show no mercy. The government eventually admitted they did not know who shot the agents but they still kept him locked away. The government does not want to hurt its reputation by admitting that they were wrong so they have people believe this man is guilty. Peltier is the symbol of the domination and continuing oppression. There are many controversial opinions on the imprisonment of Peltier. "To some, Leonard Peltier is a hero; a warrior; 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 murderer who cleverly manipulated the media and played upon public sympathy to create a fictitious, larger-than-life persona." An entire website is devoted to ensure Peltier remains in prison. There is a play on the Indian phrase, "in the spirit of Crazy Horse," when it states, "in the spirit of Coler and Williams," the two FBI agents who were murdered on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

"I am not the guilty one...I am not the one who should be called a criminal-white racist America is the criminal for the destruction of our lands and my people."-- Leonard Peltier





Welcome to the Official NPPA Web site

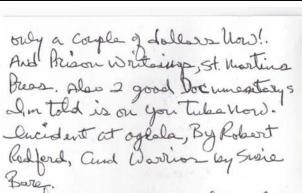
PURPOSE

No Parole Peltier Association (NPPA)

14779 days, 16 hours, 34 minutes, and 51 seconds have passed since Agents Coler and Williams were murdered on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. They will never come home

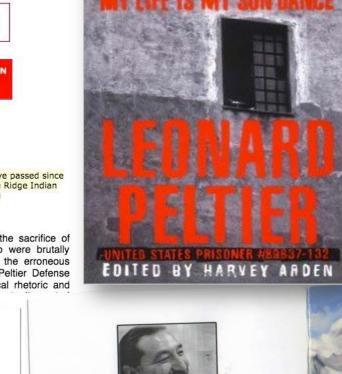
Today is Saturday, December 12, 2015

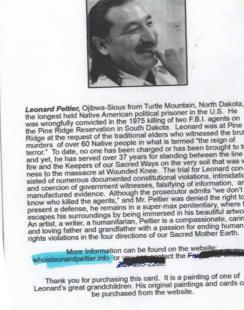
The stated purpose of the NPPA is to: 1) Honor the sacrifice of Special Agents Jack Coler and Ron Williams who were brutally



Hen if you want to I can Aus, you can send me some questions Again thank you very Much. In the spirit of Cropy Harea? Dolesha - Leonard Pettier

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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 not showing this. It seemed as if these "villains of order" simply "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 stresses, such as Wounded Knee, are not just an Indian, but an American tragedy as well. America lives with the legacy and it is up to the nation to accept the past and learn from it in order to progress. It is the right of any group of people to participate in planning their own destiny. AIM forced its audience to reconsider their people's history from an Indian perspective, rather than the usual European-dominated interpretation. There are always different perspectives and sides of a story; the challenge is to decipher the truth.