Red Power, National Liberation and the Rise of American Indian Identity

by Leif Brecke

Adopting the terminology and tactics of the black civil rights movement and later the black power movement, Red Power activists facilitated the transformation of American Indian ethnic identity from the shame and defeat born out of colonial exploitation to an identity of pride.

Since the time of Columbus, the term "Indian" has been thrust upon the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Russell Means, an American Indian Movement leader, has stated:

> You notice that I use the term American Indian rather than Native American or Native indigenous people or Amerindian when referring to my people. There has been some controversy about such terms . . . primarily it seems that American Indian is being rejected as European in origin – which is true. But all the above terms are European in origin (Means 1980:25).

American Indians ethnicity is united under a "common origin, a shared exploitation, and similar view and relationship to the land" (Nagel 1997:139).

The American Indian relationship with the earth is expressed in the Lakota language as, "*Mitakuye Oyasin!* (All Our Relations), which signifies not merely our own kin but our identity with all things on this splendid Earth" (Matthiessen 1992:*xxvi*). This relationship is clearly illustrated in the tobacco pipe ceremony of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux). Black Elk, a famous *Wichasha Wakan* (Medicine or Holy Man) of the Oglala Lakota has explained:

> "In filling a pipe, all space (the offerings to the powers of the six directions) and all things (represented by the grains of tobacco) are contracted within a single point (the bowl or heart of the pipe) so that the pipe contains, or really *is*, the universe. But since the pipe is the universe, it is also man, and the one who fills a pipe should identify himself with it, thus not only establishing the center of the universe but also his own center; he so 'expands' that the six directions of space are actually brought within himself. It is by this 'expansion' that a man ceases to be a part, a fragment, and becomes whole or holy; he shatters the illusion of separateness"(Brown 1971:21).

The shared exploitation of the Native Americans is wildly documented (Churchill 1995b:27-75; Chomsky 1993). Several acts highlight U.S. policy toward American Indians. These include the Major Crimes Act of 1885, the Allotment Act of 1887, The Citizens Act of 1924, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the Termination and Relocation Act of 1953, and the Relocation Act of 1956. The Termination and Relocation Act of 1953 and the Relocation Act of 1956 set the scene for the rise of the Red Power movement.

The Major Crimes Act of 1885 established U.S. jurisdiction over Indian reservations. The Allotment Act of 1887 removed collective ownership of Indian land, allotted small parcels of land to individual

Indians, and sold off the remaining land to private interests (Weyler 2006). The architect of this bill, Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts explained his intentions:

> "The head chief told us that there was not a family in that whole nation [Cherokee] that had not a home of its own. There was not a pauper in that nation, and the nation did not owe a dollar. . . Yet the defect of the system was apparent. They have got as far as they can go, because they own their land in common. It is Henry George's system, and under that there is no enterprise to make your home any better than that of your neighbors. There is no selfishness, which is the bottom of civilization. Till this people will consent to give up their lands, and divide them among their citizens so that each can own the land he cultivates, they will not make much more progress" (Chomsky 1993).

The Citizens Act of 1924 established American Indians as U.S. Citizens, denying them any claim to national sovereignty (Weyler 2006).

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 recognized the right of American Indians to traditional worship, language, and culture. However, traditional tribal governments were not recognized. In its place were tribal councils, governed by a constitution constructed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These "Indian chartered corporations" reflected the despotism within the BIA (Matthiessen, 1992:27).

Under the Termination and Relocation Act of 1953 selected native peoples were no longer recognized and forced into the urban "red ghettos". The man in charge of the operation was Dillon S. Myer, an Indian Commissioner who was in charge of the Japanese American internment program during WWII. By the early 1960's 109 American Indian nations encompassing 35,000 people were terminated. The Relocation Act of 1956 pressured some 35,000 people to move from the rez to the ghetto from 1957 to 1959. By 1980, 49% of the population of the reservations was relocated (Churchill 1995b:186-187).

This urbanization is a significant factor in the rise of the Red Power movement. Another is a common English-language and American education (Nagel 1997:139). Suddenly the American Indian wasn't just in history books and historical dramas; the American Indian was in your schools. American Indians had a landscape from which to draw the media and public attention. Through a common language, diverse tribal peoples could organize across vast geo-political boundaries.

Witnessing the successes of the black civil rights movement, American Indians embraced their tactics and revised them toward their own ethnic context. The American Indian civil rights movement was spearheaded by the "Fish-ins" in the Pacific Northwest throughout the early sixties. Native Americans took direct action is asserting their right to fish. The Survival of American Indians Association (SAIA) and the Native Indian Youth Council (NIYC), both pan-Indian organizations, supported these protests and recruited celebrities such as Marlon Brando to support them (Nagel, 1997:162). The Native Indian Youth Council (NIYC), the first pan-Indian protest group, had been formed in 1960. It was founded by "Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) and other educated young Indians" (Matthiessen 1992:35).

Another revising of African American terminology and philosophy is the transformation of the "Red Power" movement. The earliest use of the expression "Red Power" was by Vine Deloria Jr., then Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, who had spoken at the NCAI's 1966 convention (Nagel 1997:162). Vine Deloria Jr. remembers these early days:

> "In 1966, a number of us in the Indian field advanced "Red Power" as a means of putting the establishment on. We were greatly surprised when newspapermen began to take us seriously

> and even more so when liberals who had previously been cool and unreceptive began to smile at us in conferences. But the militant medium was quick to overtake us. Consequently I was approached one day in a Midwestern city by a group of young Indians who asked for my permission to break windows. Red Power had arrived!" (Deloria Jr. 1970:114).

Inspired by the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement was founded in 1968 by Dennis Banks (Anishinabi "Chippewa"), Clyde Bellecourt (Ojibwa), and many others. Russell Means (Oglala Lakota) was another early leader of AIM admired for his eloquent and impassioned speeches and organizing of stunning protests (Churchill 1995b:204; Nagel 1997:167).

Aim monitored police activities, set up employment programs, supported Indian education and inspired cultural renewal (Matthiessen 1992:35-36; Nagel 1997:166-167).

AIM spread through "urban Indian organizations, such as the network of urban Indian centers, Indian churches, and Indian charitable organizations in many major cities" and through "Indian social and kin networks, around the 'powwow circuit', and as a result of the reservation-urban circular migration pattern. In addition, the presence of AIM in the news media was a significant contribution toward AIM's growth" (Nagel 1997:167).

In the same year, 1968, another tendency developed throughout American Indian societies, the modern Warrior Society. Taking on the traditional role as defenders of the nation, the Kahnawake Singing Society (Mohawk) began calling itself a "warrior society". This coincides with a Mohawk blockade of Seaway International Bridge at Akwesasne. They later became the Mohawk Warrior Society (Alfred and Lowe 2005:29).

The Mohawk Warrior Society and the modern warrior societies, who developed later, embraced the same tactic and philosophy of Direct Action as AIM and other tendencies in the Red Power movement. They fulfilled the same role in indigenous societies as the Black Panther Party served in their neighborhoods, community defense and improvement. In their ground-breaking work, *Warrior Societies in Contemporary Indigenous Communities*, Alfred and Lowe write:

> There (are) fundamental differences between warrior societies and the Red Power movement. Warrior societies emerge from within (and remain a part of) indigenous communities, thus like the Mohawk Warrior Society, they are grounded in the communities' indigenous traditions and are accountable to the traditional leadership. Red Power organizations emerged from within urban centers, were highly mobile and often formed a loose network of "chapters". They focused their activities in urban centers unless called-upon by people in indigenous communities during times of crisis. Once in a community, a Red Power organization was held accountable to its hosts and adjusted its approach accordingly. Whatever the differences between them though, warrior societies and Red Power organizations did draw on the same spirit of discontent among young indigenous people and they did focus on the same fundamental problems; thus warrior societies and Red Power organizations did ally in conflict situations (Alfred and Lowe 2005:14-15).

While the membership of warrior societies and Red Power movements are quite different, warrior societies like Red Power movements often practice inter-community mutual aid. They come to the aid of other communities when invited.

In 1969, a planned incident occurred that brought the message of hope and renewal to a new generation growing up in the "fourth world" destitution of reservation life and the red slums of the inner cities. A pan-Indian group of around two hundred American Indians calling themselves "Indians of All Tribes" took over the Alcatraz Island and decommissioned correctional facility and claimed it by "right of occupation". This group was led by a young Mohawk named Richard Oakes and a Tuscarota medicine man named Mad Bear Anderson. Their spokesperson was the young firebrand speaker, John Trudell (Santee Sioux) who later became the national Chairman of AIM from 1973 until 1979. They were supported by white liberals and maintained residence from November 1969 until June 1971 (Matthiessen, 1992:37).

The "Indians of All Tribes" issued a proclamation that was both starvation serious and satirical:

> "To the Great White Father and All His People . . . We feel that this so-called island is more suitable for an Indian Reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. . . It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation. It has no fresh running water. It has inadequate sanitation facilities. There are no oil or mineral rights. . . The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others. . ." (Matthiessen, 1992:37-38).

Vine Deloria, Jr. later observed, "Alcatraz was the master stroke of Indian activism" (Deloria 1974:184-185). Wilma Mankiller, who went on to become three term elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma remarked that, "(Alcatraz) was an awakening that ultimately changed the course of her life" (Johnson, 1993:125).

The occupation of Alcatraz inspired a succession American Indian activism. During this time, AIM and a group of traditionalists declaring themselves "the Oglala Sioux Tribe" laid claim to the Black Hills by twice erecting a camp at Mount Rushmore. Young AIM leader Russell Means participated in this action as well as a "National Day of Mourning" whereby AIM seized the Mayflower II ship at Plymouth, Massachusetts on Thanksgiving Day of 1970. This was the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival at this location (Matthiessen 1992:38).

Also in 1970, the Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) people including members of the Mohawk warrior society reclaimed Stanley and Loon Island in the St. Lawrence River" (Alfred and Lowe 2005:29). This year also saw AIM occupying derelict property at the Naval Air Station near Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The following year, Aim assisted in a protest at Winter Dam in Lac Courte Oreilles, Wisconsin. Also in 1971, the Mohawk Warrior Society was asked by the Onondagas (a people along with the Mohawk who formed the Iroquois Confederacy) to assist in reinforcing a blockade of highway construction through their nation (Alfred and Lowe 2005:29).

Another significant AIM assisted event included, the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan of 1972. It started in San Francisco and ended in Washington D.C., traveling through and recruiting on Indian Reservations along the way. It ended in a 6 day occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Headquarters. They presented a 20 point plan to congress which included restoration of treaty rights. Twenty-four people were arrested. Under negotiations, their were no prosecutions, $60,000 was given to the protestors for their return transportation, and the "Twenty Points" were "considered". The Nixon government rejected the "twenty points". However, the protesters left the BIA with boxes of "evidence".

Native American activism was quickly moving from a movement for civil rights, toward a movement for treaty rights and indigenous ethnic sovereignty. Red Power advocated an international and transnational movement for National Liberation (Nagel 1997:168).

Ward Churchill (Creek and Keetoowah Band Cherokee), an autonomous AIM Activist, a former spokesperson for the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, and Professor of Ethnic Studies and Coordinator of American Indian Studies at the University of Colorado, comments on Indigenist National liberation:

> "You may have nations that are also states, but you've got most nations rejecting statism. So you can make an argument, as I have, that the assertion of sovereignty on the part of indigenous nations is an explicitly anti-statist ideal, and the basis of commonality with people who define themselves as anarchists." (Churchill, 1995a)

The final major AIM standoff started in 1973 at Wounded Knee. It lasted for 71 days.

Attorney Larry Levanthal, who served as counsel for AIM said, "The courts found that there was illegal use of the military, illegal wiretap, false testimony, bribing of witnesses, covering up of crimes, subornation of perjury, deception of the counsel and deception of the courts." Before a single case went to trial, the occupation cost the U.S. $7 million (Matthiessen 1992:82).

The legal proceedings from this and other actions was a significant drain on AIM's financial resources and personal energy. One AIM activist notes, "We've been so busy in court fighting these indictments we've had neither the time nor the money to for much of anything" (Nagel, 1977:177).

Other actions in 1973 include an eviction of white trespassers on the Kahnawake Nation by the Mohawk Warrior Society and AIM activists. The Warrior Society is exposed to corporate media scrutiny for the first time (Alfred and Lowe 2005:29).

The following year, through pervasive support from indigenous communities, the Mohawk Warrior Society and AIM members reclaim Moss Lake Camp from New York State. Louis Cameron leads the forming of the Ojibway Warrior Society and they reclaim

Anicinabe Park in Kenora, Ontario. Louis Cameron noted:

> "In Kenora they put us down if we say we believe in AIM. So for the purpose of our own people here we titled the movement – which is the same movement as the American Indian Movement across the continent – the Ojibway Warriors Society. It serves the people, it puts the aims and aspirations of our people together, especially the feeling of being Indian people. It started from this. Throughout the reservations and in town they're always asking us: "What organization are you from? . . . What organization do you represent?" And finally, our people said we're the Ojibway Warriors Society. Myself, it doesn't matter what title you put on it. It's the movement that's important" (Alfred and Lowe 2005:19).

Alfred and Lowe note, "The Ojibway Warrior Society appears to have been a unique combination of the urban and "revolutionary" (in outlook and strategic objective) Red Power movement with the culturally and community rooted Mohawk Warrior Society" (Alfred and Lowe 2005:19).

On March 12, 1975, AIM head of security Douglas Durham was exposed as an FBI operative. (Matthiessen, 1992:110)

A gun battle at Oglala on June 1975 between AIM members and FBI agents resulted in the shooting deaths of Joseph Stuntz and two FBI agents, Jack Coler and Ronald Williams. Leonard Peltier was eventually convicted of the agents' deaths. Many AIM activists claim that the AIM members who shot at the FBI agents were engaged in self-defense, and thus the killing was not a murder. Indeed, two of Peltier's co-defendants in the agents' murder were acquitted on grounds of self-defense in a separate trial. Leonard's freedom is cause célèbre for the international left.

AIM Spokesman John Trudell's wife, four children, and mother-in-law died in a suspicious fire on their reservation in Nevada just twelve hours after John burned a US flag at FBI headquarters in D.C.

FBI infiltration and counter-intelligence had worked strong fissures into the American Indian Movement. Ward Churchill observes:

> "The national structure of the American Indian Movement was penetrated pretty successfully, because you had people drawn together in an organization from a whole variety of locations to function as a sort of a governing council. That was a really bad model. Where we were impenetrable was actually on the ground with the action end of the organization, because these were all family units. The Means family, the Robidoux-Peltier family and their cousins were all related and had grown up together. Well, how exactly do you plant somebody in the middle of that? You don't" (Churchill 1995a).

AIM splits into two irreconcilable factions in 1993. Dennis Banks and Claude Bellecourt form the National American Indian Movement, Inc. Grand Governing Council (NAIM).

Autonomous AIM chapters confederate and form the American Indian Movement International Confederation of Autonomous Chapters. Russell Means, Ward Churchill, and John Trudell are affiliated with this movement. Autonomous AIM guided by the principles of "traditional spirituality, sovereignty, self-determination, sobriety, and mutual respect". Their literature establishes their identity:

> "AIM is a bonafide national liberation movement-open to the participation of all indigenous people, regardless of the "status" or "recognition" bestowed upon them by our oppressors - oriented specifically and exclusively to reasserting the sovereign and self- determining dignity of our nations."

The American Indian Movement suffered the fate of splintering and attacking inward as the Black Panther Party. Suspicion, bad-faith, bad-jacketing, and egos clashed with the easy prodding of the FBI (Churchill and Jim, 2001).

Bibliography

Alfred, Taiaiake, Ph.D. and Lana Lowe, M.A.

2005 *Warrior Societies in Contemporary Indigenous Communities: A Background*

Paper Prepared for the Ipperwash Inquiry. Paper, Indigenous Governance

Programs University of Victoria. Available online,

www.ipperwashinquiry.ca/policy_part/research/pdf/Alfred_and_Lowe.pdf

Brown, Joseph Epes (Editor)

1971 *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Baltimore: Penguin Books

Churchill, Ward

1995a *Indigenism, Anarchism, and the State: An Interview with Ward Churchill*. Electronic interview, http://auto_sol.tao.ca/node/view/1333

1995b *Since Predator Came: Notes from the Struggle for American Indian Liberation*. Littleton, Colorado: Aigis Publications

Chomsky, Noam

1993 *Year 501: The Conquest* Continues. Published by South End Press. As posted online,

http://www.zmag.org/Chomsky/year/year-c09-s06.html#FN16

Deloria Jr., Vine

1970 *We Talk, You Listen*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

1974 "The Rise of Indian Activism" in *The Social Reality of Ethnic America* ed. by R. Gomez, C. Collingham, R. Endo, and K. Jackson. Lexington, Massachusetts: Heath

1989 *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press

Charles W. Dyson, Jr.

2004 Native Sovereignty, Narrative Argument, and an International Shift: The 1974 Rhetoric of George Manuel and Vine Deloria, Jr. Master of Arts thesis, Blacksburg, Virginia, July 22, 2004

Churchill, Ward and Jim Vander Wall

2002 *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party*. NY: South End Press

Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives

1999 Law Enforcement Problems at the Border Between the United States and Canada: Drug Smuggling, Illegal Immigration and Terrorism: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives. April 14, 1999

commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju63123.000/hju63123_0.HTM#158

Johnson, Troy

1993 *The Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island, Indian Self-Determination, and the Rise of Indian Activism* Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles

Josephy Jr., Alvin M.

1971 *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Matthiessen, Peter

1992 *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. New York: Penguin Books

Means, Russell

1980 "Fighting Words on the Future of the Earth," in *Mother Jones* (December, 1980)

1995 *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin

Nagel, Joane

1997 *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press

Native Youth Movement

2006 Native Youth Movement. Promotional website, http://wolvesnotsheep.resist.ca/nym/nym.shtm

Weyler, Rex

2006 *Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against First Nations*. As posted online, http://freepeltier.org/state_of_siege.htm