

BAAS Mini Lecture – Red Power: The Forgotten Movement

CONTENT WARNINGS: Death, sexual violence, violence, murder, racism, sexism.

Hello, I'm Genevieve Johnson-Smith and today I'm going to talk about an element of the American Civil Rights movement you may not have heard of – Indigenous activism. In the UK particularly, engagement with Indigenous history is minimal. We're going to go over some of the major events related to Indigenous rights in the 1960s and 70s and hopefully get thinking about their impact. When I say Indigenous, I am referring to the various groups of people in the Americas often referred to as Native Americans or American Indians, in the past offensively referred to as "Red Indians" – that lived there before the arrival of Europeans. From the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492 to the present day, Indigenous people have experienced what is now acknowledged as a genocide. The Indigenous population of North America fell by an estimated 80-90% within the first centuries of European colonisation, perpetuated by several empires, prominently the British. Indigenous groups were enslaved, massacred, exposed to European diseases and forcibly moved from their homes to make way for the new settlers of the US. The US government repeatedly made treaties with Indigenous groups in order to gain their land, none of which were honoured. As recently as the late 20th century, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in boarding schools run by the US government. Children were punished for speaking their own language, for looking "Indian", even for smelling "Indian" and boarding school survivors have reported that the darker the child's skin, the

harder the beating was.¹ Sexual abuse within these schools was not uncommon.²

Indigenous women are still forcibly sterilised in modern North America, their reproductive organs damaged or removed without their consent to prevent Indigenous pregnancies.

These atrocities were either committed by colonisers, or are a direct consequence of colonisation. The ongoing negative treatment of Indigenous Americans prompted resistance in the 60s and 70s, a period of activism around many issues in the US – the Vietnam War, women’s liberation, gay rights and perhaps the most well-known, the Civil Rights Movement, most often associated with African-Americans. **[SHOW PICTURES OF VARIOUS MOVEMENTS]**



¹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 211- 212.

² Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 211- 212



Black history has appropriately had a resurgence of interest in recent years, as Black Lives Matter rose to prominence and nations began to confront their own often difficult relationships with their Black history or the emergence of Black oppression in the US, often through the perpetuation of slavery. The obvious relationship between UK history, slavery and the oppression of Black Americans means you are likely to have engaged with education or popular media which explores Black American history, including the Civil Rights Movement. However, as Indigenous historian and activist Vine Deloria Jr wrote in 1969 “civil rights has been the most important and least understood movement of our generation... by defining the problem as one of race and making race refer solely to black, Indians are systematically excluded from consideration.”³ His commentary during this year is significant, as this is the year of one of the most important events of the Red Power movement – the Occupation of Alcatraz. Often noted by historians as the

³ Deloria Jr., Vine, *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1969): 168.

catalyst for the movement, the 14 month occupation of Alcatraz Island was begun in November 1969 by a group called “Indians of All Tribes”.⁴ [SHOW PICTURE OF ALCATRAZ OCCUPATION]



The occupiers claimed the land on the basis of the broken Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), which said unused U.S. federal property would be returned to Indigenous Americans – Alcatraz Island had been unused since the prison was closed in 1963.⁵ The occupiers’ aim was to attain the deeds from the government to build upon the island educational buildings such as a Centre for Native American Studies.⁶ Though

⁴ Alvin M. Joseph, Joane Nagel and Troy R. Johnson, *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight For Freedom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): 40.

⁵ Troy R. Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne, *American Indian activism: Alcatraz to the longest walk* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 27.

⁶ Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 28.

the occupation was non-violent, the requests were denied and by the end of the occupation all those remaining were removed by heavily armed federal marshals.⁷

During the Trail of Broken Treaties protest of autumn 1972, the American Indian Movement (known as AIM), which many had joined following Alcatraz, took a 20 point proposal to Washington which laid out negotiations for Indigenous rights, living standards and importantly called upon the government to honour their treaties.⁸ Hundreds of Indigenous people from various tribes travelled across the country to support the proposal, where they had been promised accommodation whilst officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs sat down with AIM leaders Russell Means and Dennis Banks.⁹ When the first group arrived however, the BIA refused to meet with anyone and the visitors were placed in rat infested church basements.¹⁰ As more groups arrived, no facilities for cooking or showering were provided as promised, and after increasingly hostile treatment, AIM and their supporters entered and occupied the BIA building, where they

⁷ Johnson et al, *American Indian Activism*, 29.

⁸ Full 20 Point Proposal can be found at The American Indian Cultural Support website <http://www.aics.org/WK/wk004.html>

⁹ Kenneth S. Stern, *Loud Hawk: The United States Versus the American Indian Movement* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 327.

¹⁰ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 150-151.

pledged to stay until at least nine of their points were considered.¹¹ [SHOW

PICTURE OF BIA OCCUPATION]



As the federal government threatened force and demanded AIM leave, no negotiations were made on the points and the occupiers became angry and frustrated, rummaging through every room in search of documents which contained broken treaties.¹² Whilst the government's deception and mistreatment received no media attention, destruction of government property caused public outcry. The blame was placed on the shoulders of AIM by government officials, who had never had any intention of negotiating.

Perhaps the best known protest of the Red Power movement was when AIM occupied the town of Wounded Knee on February 27th 1973. Wounded Knee is a significant location in Indigenous history due to the Wounded Knee Massacre of

¹¹ Ibid., 152.

¹² Johnson, *Red Power*, 10.

1890, during which the US army killed at least 300 mostly unarmed Lakota Sioux people. Eyewitness accounts of the massacre spoke of the “excitable” and “berserk” slaughter of men, women and babies by the soldiers, who were later awarded Medals of Honour. The frozen bodies were collected three days later and buried in a mass grave. [\[SHOW WOUNDED KNEE IMAGE\]](#)



[SHOW AIM WOUNDED KNEE BADGE]



On February 17th 1973 around 200 AIM members and supporters, many belonging to Sioux groups, drove to Wounded Knee, where after paying their respects at the 1890 mass grave, they began their 71-day occupation.¹³ AIM leaders again demanded that treaties be honoured and that tribes be permitted to make new treaties in order to gain self-determination.¹⁴ Within days, the entire town was surrounded by FBI and tank-like US Army vehicles and a media frenzy began .

[SHOW IMAGES OF US MILITARY VEHICLES AT WOUNDED KNEE AND OF THE OCCUPIERS]

¹³ Ibid., 202.

¹⁴ Stern, *Loud Hawk*, 332.



In order to protect the FBI and military from a negative public image due to their heavy handedness, roadblocks and a media blackout were soon imposed. The government cut off water and electricity to the town and attempted to starve out the occupants.¹⁵ Dennis Banks in his autobiography recounted the occupation in detail, describing the incredible amount of armed personnel; jets above, snipers, machine guns and armoured cars, despite the fact that the United States Constitution forbids the use of the army in domestic conflicts.¹⁶ The occupation had become an armed stand-off. The occupiers had around 37 firearms collectively, and though the FBI claimed shooting was equal on both sides, tens of thousands of army ammunition shells were found at Wounded Knee after the siege.

After the media blackout, it was celebrities who began to champion AIM's cause. Jane Fonda, Johnny Cash and Black Panther member Angela Davis were amongst figures to publicly support the occupation and denounce the behaviour of the government.¹⁷ In a successful effort to thrust the occupation into the world news, Marlon Brando declined his Academy Award for *The Godfather* in 1973, asking Indigenous activist Sacheen Littlefeather to go on stage and refuse it for him.

¹⁵ Smith and Warror, *Like a Hurricane*, 208.

¹⁶ Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and The Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004): 171.

¹⁷ Johnson et al, *American Indian Activism*, 103.

[SHOW PICTURE OF SACHEEN LITTLEFEATHER]



Threatened with arrest if she read out his speech, she said Brando was refusing his award in protest of Hollywood’s treatment of Indigenous people and in support of Wounded Knee.¹⁸ She was escorted off stage, taunted and threatened with violence. As recently as last month, there have been questions raised about the truth of Littlefeather’s identity as an Indigenous woman, showing how relevant and politicized these issues still are. You might have seen in the news recently that the Academy formally apologised to Littlefeather in June 2022.

The siege ended with an agreement on May 5th to disarm following several AIM deaths. The agreement included the promise that if AIM would disarm and leave Wounded Knee, the government would re-examine The Treaty of Fort Laramie,

¹⁸ “Marlon Brando’s Oscar win for The Godfather,” YouTube video, 2:21, posted by “Oscars”, 2nd October 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QUacU0I4yU>

which had promised that Sioux land would remain in the hands of the Sioux people. The government did not implement its side of the agreement and the Treaty of Fort Laramie remains broken, as do an estimated 500 treaties made by the US government with Indigenous tribes.¹⁹

As I conclude and leave you to think about the events of the Red Power movement, I think it's important to consider the impact the main events of the movement may have had. Though the participants in this movement may not have achieved the goals they set out with, they did succeed in drawing attention to Indigenous issues in a time when so many other issues were in the national spotlight. Indigenous people continue to struggle against oppression from the US government and the ongoing effects of colonisation. Learning about Indigenous history helps us not only to understand Indigenous culture, but to reckon with our own history as a colonising nation, and to understand how our history is intertwined with that of the Indigenous people of the Americas.

I'd like to leave you some questions to debate, as a class or perhaps in small groups.

1. Why has Indigenous activism in the civil rights period been so overlooked in comparison to other activism from the time? Is there just one reason, or several contributing factors?
2. Which of the events covered do you think would have been the most successful at advocating for Indigenous people and why?

¹⁹ See Vine Deloria Jr's *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* for an overview of this.

