American Indian Activism and the Rise of Red Power

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American society tends to view Native Americans through two lenses. They are either seen as vicious warrior braves or as docile, static and complacent people, content to live in the past. This stereotypical notion could not be further from the truth. Throughout history Native Americans have fought for their rights, their land, and their wellbeing. Often times those fights took the form of physical confrontations but equally as frequently they fought in courtrooms and on paper. Native American activism in the mid-twentieth century used all of these different methods, and was irrevocably influenced by the atmosphere of the world in which they were taking place. The socio-political environment of post-World War II America provided the necessary catalyst for Native American activism which when combined with the socio-political atmosphere of the civil rights era led to the development of the Red Power Movement.

When World War II came to a close America had a new outlook, "anything seemed possible so long as it involved capitalism, expansion, and modernism".[1] Unfortunately for Indian Country to the rest of America they did not embody any of these characteristics. As the new decade dawned, a new era in Indian policy dawned as well. In 1953 the United States Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108, the policy of termination which effectively removed government funding and benefits from Native tribes, decreeing tribal members fully assimilated and essentially ready to stand on their own as functioning members of American society. However with termination came land taxation, removal of health and education programs and an inevitable increase in poverty. The same year that Congress passed HCR 108 it also passed Public Law 280 which gave select states jurisdiction over all reservation civil and criminal cases

[1] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 63.

regardless of tribal consent. Historians disagree on the intentions of lawmakers in regards to termination but all agree that it was one of the most detrimental Indian policies of the twentieth century.

At the same time that Congress was implementing HCR 108 and PL 280 the Bureau of Indian Affairs was executing its Voluntary Relocation Program. In 1951 the BIA, seeking to solve the Indian problem, began encouraging Native peoples to leave the reservation and move to urban areas as the principle strategy of termination. Historian Daniel Cobb explains, "Cold War ideology infused the rationale for termination. Many of its advocates held that reservations served as hothouses for communism … in the minds of those who crafted the policy, termination proffered a free market solution to poverty, cultural backwardness, and second-class citizenship. Ideologically, it solved the 'Indian problem' by reaffirming the superiority of the dominant culture and the capitalistic economic system that give it life."[2] Termination and relocation had indirect effects however. Termination had the misfortune of having followed the policies of the Collier era, a time when federal Indian policy stressed tribal self-determination. The policy of relocation created large urban Indian populations, populations of diverse tribal backgrounds who bonded together creating a pan-Indian identity. "For as the shock waves of termination rolled through Indian country, Indian people realized that something had to be done and that they could count upon nobody save themselves. That realization became a major impetus for the gathering of the modern tribal sovereignty movement."[3] As a result a new generation, populated with newly educated World War II veterans came into positions of power and strongly opposed this new oppressive tribal disenfranchisement.

[2] Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 13.
[3] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 86.

One member of this new generation was D'Arcy McNickle (Flathead). Primarily a writer McNickle was a strong advocate for Native sovereignty. As Wilkinson notes, "For three decades D'Arcy McNickle was the strongest and most eloquent Native public advocate for Indian nationalism."[4] One major brainchild of McNickle's was the NCAI. Founded in November 1944, the National Congress of American Indians served as the first major inter-tribal organization. Initially the NCAI worked on an extremely small budget and represented only a handful of tribes. It was not until the end of World War II and the return of the veterans that membership and action surged. "On coming home, the veterans brought with them new attitudes. They had gone into the outside world and succeeded. They had been treated as equals – and expected that to continue. To be sure, they faced disappointments. Reservation jobs were scarce, and old-style BIA domination and manipulation all too familiar."[5] For many veterans active participation seemed the only option. Throughout the 1950s the NCAI served as a legal counsel for tribes facing termination. NCAI president Joe Garry (Coeur d'Alene) and executive director Helen Peterson (Lakota) drove around the country giving speeches to tribes encouraging them to hold onto their lands at all costs often saying, "Don't sit back and let things happen to you."[6] This pan-Indian identity characterized the start of the modern tribal sovereignty movement.

One of the unforeseen consequences of the relocation program was the development of an Indian identity as opposed to a strictly tribal identity. Historian Joane Nagel attributes this process to, "producing an alloy of tribal, regional, and supratribal identifications, adding a layer of 'Indian' identity into the Native American ethnic amalgam."[7] This pan-Indian identity became essential for survival in the cities for many urban Indians. "Almost every racial and ethnic group

[4] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 99.
[5] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 103.
[6] Joe Garry. In *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* by Charles Wilkinson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005), 105.
[7] Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.

in the United States has become more urbanized since World War II, but none as quickly and dramatically as American Indians."[8] With large populations of urban Indians clustered together in cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis supratribal organizations began to take root and a further identifier of urban Indian took hold. As the decade continued, D'Arcy McNickle, along with anthropologist Sol Tax and the blessing of the NCAI, organized the American Indian Chicago Conference. Held in 1961 the AICC was the first major event hosted by the NCAI.

Historian James LaGrand argues that one of the most important influences of the AICC was the creation of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC). Led by college-educated visionaries Mel Thom (Paiute), Shirley Hill Witt (Mohawk) and Clyde Warrior (Ponca) among others the youth attendees of the AICC formed their own group in order to express their views and address the issues they deemed most important. Many young attendees at the AICC felt disenfranchised during the meetings. They felt that the NCAI was misrepresenting Native, specifically young, urban Native, interests and were far too lenient with the BIA. Thom coined the term Uncle Tomahawks using it to refer to figures "fumbling around, passing resolutions, and putting headdresses on people" and ultimately being too weak to take a strong stand for their people.[9] Seeking a method of action and reform that would produce tangible results Thom, Warrior, and the others joined forces, created their own organization, and instilled within it a goal of urgency. Characterized by this sense of urgency the NIYC became a powerful movement and pan-Indian organization throughout the 1960s and 70s. One of the main goals of the NIYC was to reform Native education and to force the maintenance of treaty rights. No social

[8] James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-57* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 3.
[9] Melvin Thom, In *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-57* by James LaGrand (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 184.

movements exist within a vacuum however and the NIYC was no exception. "In its crusade to combat poverty on reservations and reform Indian education, the NIYC took its cue from the sociopolitical changes unfolding in Washington, D.C."[10] The Civil Rights movement was in full swing by the early 1960s and greatly influenced Native American youth activists.

Despite the perceived similarities between the Civil Rights movement and Native American activism, they had extremely different goals. As Wilkinson explains, the objectives and issues were different. "Tribes strove to protect their sovereignty and land bases, matters outside the scope of civil rights … Blacks were determined to eliminate segregation and allow integration; Indians sought to reverse forced assimilation."[11] This does not mean that they were unreceptive to the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, despite the fact that Wilkinson goes on to say that Indians stayed away from Civil Rights issues NIYC leaders Mel Thom and Hank Adams among others joined in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor Peoples Campaign march on Washington.[12] "Their issues were different because their history was different. What the NIYC activists borrowed from their African American counterparts was their strategy, even while they sharply distinguished the treaty rights cause from the movement for full civil rights."[13] Historian Bradley Shreve explains the atmosphere of the 1960s explaining how the environment in which the NIYC was born was responsible for its urgency and ultimate militancy outlook:

> More than any other decade in the twentieth century, the 1960s signaled a time when young people questioned and challenged the political, social, and moral direction of the United States. They took to the streets in their crusade: they protested, marched, occupied, sat-- in, fished-- in, broke in, blew up, and burned down. They railed against the structures, symbols, and processes they believed to be evil. The Cold War and the black-- and-- white world it spawned served as the greatest catalyst in this process. But young Americans, regardless of their race or

[10] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 141.
[11] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 129.
[12] Bradley Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial': The Fish-In Movement and the Rise of Intertribal Activism," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (2009): 419.
[13] Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial,'" 419.

> ethnicity, also took a cue from their elders. Securing any sort of political legacy requires a degree of mentoring; the vigilant must always take care to pass the torch to the future generation.[14]

Perhaps the most important aspect of Shreve's quote is that the NIYC learned from their elders. Despite the disagreements, name calling and resentment that continued well into the 1970s the NCAI was a profound influence on the origins of the NIYC and on young Native activists well into the late twentieth century.

Over the course of the 1950s the NCAI was an important though fairly unimpressive organization. Aside from the AICC the Congress did not have much to show for its almost twenty year existence. In 1964 Vine Deloria, Jr. (Sioux) ran a successful campaign for executive director of the NCAI. Wilkinson credits Deloria's three years as executive director with revitalizing the organization and turning it into an effective advocate for tribal rights. Wilkinson also cites Deloria's intellectual activism and its similarities to NIYC leaders Warrior, Adams and Thom claiming "the four fed off one another, by telephone, sessions at conferences, and long letters about philosophy and strategy."[15] Deloria worked out of Washington, D. C., while the others mainly focused on reservations in the west. Although these leaders had similar goals and ideals they had one major difference, the means to the end. Deloria was focused mainly on courtroom delegation and legal progress while Warrior, Adams and Thom were increasingly placing more emphasis on direct action and becoming ever more militant.

In 1964 President Johnson launched his War on Poverty legislation with its central principle of community action. In Indian Country this legislation was received with optimism since the concept of community action held very similar ideologies to Collier's notions of self-determination. In addition to community action the War on Poverty included the development of

[14] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 66-67.
[15] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 111.

the Office of Economic Opportunity. This bill allowed funds to be used to benefit Indians but the grants could only be created by state or federal agencies. Knowing they would see little of those funds if approvals had to go through the BIA tribal leaders went to Washington to lobby the inclusion of three words into the bill: a tribal government. This milestone was passed and the War on Poverty bill included tribal governments as eligible grantees of OEO funds. "For the first time in American History, Indian people had conceived of a provision to be inserted in national legislation and then lobbied it through Congress into law."[16] This same year saw a milestone for direct action advocates as well. Members of the NIYC traveled to Washington State to host the first ever fish-in in protest of treaty fishing right violations.

The term fish-in was an adoption from the Civil Rights movement's sit-ins. Instead of protesting their right to equality however, the Native activists were protesting the violation of their treaty rights. When the peoples of the Puget Sound area of Washington State signed treaties with then governor Isaac Ingalls Stevens in 1853 they ensured their continuing access to fish and wildlife. The treaties "guaranteed that Native people had 'the right of taking fish, at all usual and accustomed grounds and stations' and confirmed that Indian people held their right to fish 'in common with all citizens of the Territory.'"[17] However when Public Law 280 gave Washington State jurisdiction over reservations the state government began regulating Native fishing on the grounds of conservation. Shortly after the passage of PL 280 game wardens began arresting native fisherman at an accelerated level claiming it was their unregulated gillnetting that was to blame for the depletion of the trout and salmon populations. Confrontations between Indian fishers and state authorities escalated in the early 1960s. Ultimately the people of the Puget Sound area contacted the NIYC for help in defending their treaty fishing rights.

[16] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 128.
[17] Shreve, '"From Time Immemorial,'" 407-408.

The NIYC decided on the first few days of March 1964 to hold the first fish-in and accompanying rally in the capitol of Olympia. "Like civil rights strategists, NIYC leaders recognized that news coverage of the fish-ins was vital to spreading the message about Indian treaty rights and Washington State's suppression of those rights."[18] Consequently Hank Adams contacted long time civil rights activist and famous movie star Marlon Brando for support. Adams hoped that Brando's presence would attract greater media attention and ideally aid in the public's sympathy for their cause. It worked. When photographs of Brando's arrest for illegal fishing covered newsstands all over the nation a frenzy of media rushed to await the NIYC in Olympia. Estimates for the size of the crowd range from 2,000 to 5,000 but regardless it was the "largest intertribal protest of modern day."[19] Although initially unsuccessful, the March fish-ins were essential in transforming the NIYC into a nationally recognized inter-tribal organization. "'Red Power' as a slogan might not have gained widespread appeal until the late 1960s, but intertribal direct action as a tactical approach to solving issues facing American Indians began with those Native students who gathered along the banks of the Puyallup and Nisqually rivers years earlier."[20]

With the national recognition received from the fish-ins NIYC membership tripled, from 40 members in 1963 to over 120 in 1964. With this newfound fame and membership, the organization grew increasingly more militant and took stronger stances on treaty rights, cultural preservation, and tribal sovereignty. Warrior and other militant NIYC members began attacking the NCAI for being too passive calling them the National Congress of Aged Indians. "Staffed by angry young students who witnessed the rising militancy in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, and the antiwar movement, the NIYC shared the same

[18] Shreve, '"From Time Immemorial,'" 420.
[19] Shreve, '"From Time Immemorial,'" 420.
[20] Shreve, '"From Time Immemorial,'" 434.

generational anxieties that were part and parcel of the Cold War sociopolitical landscape. Their world was one of right and wrong, black and white, good and evil."[21] Clyde Warrior took over leadership of the NIYC in 1966 and remained in power until his death in 1968. Under his control the NIYC grew more and more militant. In July of 1966, only one month after Stokely Carmichael coined the term "Black Power' Warrior, during an Oklahoma City Fourth of July parade, painted 'Red Power!' on one side of his car and 'Custer Died for Your Sins' on the other.[22] As protest activism increased in the mid to late 1960s the development of a nationally recognized Red Power movement increased as well.

Although the 1960s were pock marked with direct action protest activism no singular event penetrated the national consciousness quite like the takeover of Alcatraz Island. In November 1969 a group of urban Indians calling themselves the Indians of All Tribes laid claim to the former prison. Claiming the island for a center of Indian and ecological studies the Indians of All Tribes put together an Alcatraz Proclamation which was both deeply sarcastic and deadly serious. They offered to make a payment of $24 for the island claiming a precedent had been set on 'a similar island about 300 years ago.' They also deemed Alcatraz suitable land for a reservation since there was 'no fresh running water,' 'no oil or mineral rights' the land was 'rocky and unproductive' and 'the population has always been held as prisoners.'[23] During the nineteen-month occupation the number or protesters and visitors fluctuated ranging from close to one thousand to the fifteen that were left when they were removed by federal marshals in June of 1971. Although negotiations between Indians of All Tribes and the federal government were unproductive the lasting effects of the occupation of Alcatraz were further reaching than anyone anticipated. "America was deeply moved by the bold, assertive announcement that these peoples,

[21] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 158.
[22] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 159.
[23] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 134.

so long consigned to the past tense, had a modern life and relevance."[24] Scholars agree that the Alcatraz take over was the turning point in Native American activism. It is widely regarded as the symbolic beginning of the Red Power movement most importantly because it garnered such massive media attention. It also served as the springboard for a new wave of inter-tribal protest activism. Wilkinson quotes Mel Thom as saying "We had decided that what we needed was a movement. Not an organization, but a movement. Organizations rearrange history. Movements make history."[25] This sentiment soon took form in the American Indian Movement.

One of the consequences of the relocation program was a vast increase in urban Indians. One such city that experienced a dramatic increase in its Indian population was Minneapolis, Minnesota. Like most urban Indians those in Minneapolis felt the sting of extreme poverty, racial discrimination and a dramatic lack of resources. Many felt they were the victims of unfair police discrimination and that the city was prohibiting their right for self-determination. As a result South Minneapolis residents created a 'street patrol' to monitor police activity and prevent injustice.[26] From a gathering of 250 Minneapolis Indians in 1968 the American Indian Movement was born. In addition to its focus on police harassment AIM, led by Dennis Banks (Chippewa) and Clyde Bellecourt (Chippewa), also strove to strengthen Indian pride, particularly among Indian youth. AIM's popularity grew rapidly and they soon expanded their reach. "While the membership base of the NIYC was comprised primarily of students, AIM initially drew a relocated urban underclass to their movement."[27]

In the summer of 1972 AIM members met with reservation leaders to plan a march on Washington in order to voice their disapproval of BIA policy and control. Called The Trail of

[24] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 137.
[25] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 111.
[26] LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis*, 206.
[27] Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism," 117.

Broken Treaties the caravan would zig zag across the country finally landing in Washington only weeks before the presidential election, where Hank Adams would present his visionary yet radical Twenty Points.[28] AIM members predominantly dominated the march and when poor planning revealed a lack of adequate accommodations the group staged a takeover of the BIA building. They barricaded themselves inside and for six days set about destroying offices, furniture, windows, etc. This reaction of destruction and violence caused a rift among Native activist groups. "The sacking of the BIA building more or less ended the active alliance between the NIYC and AIM, as Hank Adams and the council's leadership condemned the action as wanton destruction."[29] The Trail of Broken Treaties and the subsequent BIA take over were regarded by many Native peoples as an unnecessary show of violence and ruin and thoughtless destruction of important documents. However the event marked an important turning point in AIM's history.

After the disappointment of the Trail of Broken Treaties, AIM continued its work in protest activism particularly voicing its opinions against the BIA. Nagel claims, "No single event of the Red Power era more clearly illustrates the combination of Indian grievances and community tensions than the events on the Pine Ridge reservation in the spring of 1973, a ten-week-long siege that came to be known as 'Wounded Knee.'"[30] AIM activist and figurehead Russell Means (Lakota) had recently moved back to the Pine Ridge reservation in 1972 when the Oglala Sioux elected Dick Wilson as tribal chairman. The race was closely contested and cries of a BIA fixed race and of nepotism soon rang out. Donna Hightower Langston claims that during this time "Pine Ridge had a murder rate 700 times that of Detroit. Dick Wilson's private army, called 'goons,' created an atmosphere where arson, beating, and murder were common". She

[28] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 140-142.
[29] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 195.
[30] Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, 171.

goes on to claim, "half of the BIA police moonlighted as goons."[31] An effort to impeach Wilson resulted in a rift within the tribe with AIM members and sympathizers siding against Wilson. The siege began when 250 AIM supporters led by Russell Means and Dennis Banks arrived at Pine Ridge. The resulting armed conflict lasted 71 days and resulted in hundreds wounded and the death of two Indian participants. Dick Wilson remained in power and the federal government issued 185 indictments mostly against AIM members. Wilkinson argues that while their intentions were good, AIM was doomed for failure. "While sincere in their traditionalism, the AIM leaders lived most of their lives in the cities, not in Indian country". Wilkinson argues that to understand functioning and long lasting Native activism one must look to the Pacific Northwest and to the fish-ins, "where tribal people were trying to combine activism and court enforcement."[32]

In the thirty or so years immediately following World War II America witnessed profound social and political change. Initial fear of communism lead to strict, pro-capitalist Indian legislation resulting in the termination of hundreds of tribes and the relocation of countless Indian people. From this same environment rose strong leaders, including many veterans, influenced by Cold War foreign policy and American idealism. They created the foundation for Native activism as it was defined in the 1950s and 1960s. Then arose native youth movements, influenced by other national youth movements, urbanization and the creation of a pan-Indian identity, and the Civil Rights era. They maintained the notion of urgency in their actions and optioned for direct action as the best policy. "Red Power, in the form of the Alcatraz occupation and the activist events that followed challenged cultural depictions of Indians as

[31] Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism," 126.
[32] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 149.

victims of history, as living relics, powerless and subjugated."[33] The notion of Red Power accompanied activist militancy and resulted in a series of violent actions. The ideals and goals of these movements remained the same however regardless of the methods used to obtain them. This period of Native American activism resulted in a renewed interest in revitalizing and preserving tribal cultures. Nagel cites a rise in what she calls "'retraditionalization,' that is, the return of Native Americans to tribal cultural traditions, parallels a reconnection with religious and cultural roots."[34] Additionally the creation of a pan-Indian identity maintains, as the NIYC is one of the oldest intertribal organizations still in existence.[35] Today, Wilkinson claims, native voices are as strong as ever and although there is still a ways to go before "reservations are the secure and prosperous homelands, places of both modernity and tradition, they want them to be" no longer do we need to ask "Can the Indian voice endure?"[36]

[33] Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, 133.
[34] Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, 193.
[35] Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 203.
[36] Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 383.