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# Indian Students and Reminiscences of Alcatraz

STEVE TALBOT

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I was involved in the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by American Indian students from San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, during the first six months of that event. I was a volunteer instructor in the then-developing Native American studies program at UC Berkeley, and many of the original fourteen who secretly landed on Alcatraz Island on 9 November 1969 were members of my class on American Indian liberation. I am taking the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Alcatraz to add some reminiscences and perhaps little-known facts to the story that others are now documenting.<sup>1</sup>

As far as I can tell, the first academic article in the United States to be published on this experiment in Indian liberation was mine. It was published in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* in 1978 on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Alcatraz landing. Its title was "Free Alcatraz: the Culture of Native American Liberation."<sup>2</sup> Earlier, in the spring of 1970, I had read a draft of this article before the Northwest Anthropological Association meeting in Oregon. It is interesting to note that anthropologists, who for so long have billed themselves as experts on things Indian, totally ignored this historic event. Although my graduate work was in anthropology at UC Berkeley, my personal association and ethnic loyalties lay with the Native American community, so I made certain that the Indians of All Tribes (as the occupiers called themselves) re-

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viewed my paper and gave me their feedback before I read it at the anthropology meeting.

The Alcatraz paper was also picked up and published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1977 in their journal of ethnography (anthropology).<sup>3</sup> Its editor at the time was the late Julia Petrova Averkieva, who had been a student of Franz Boas, a major figure in U.S. anthropology, and who had done early research under Boas among Northwest Coast Indians. Averkieva, whom I corresponded with and subsequently met when I lived in Europe following the Alcatraz occupation, was sincerely interested in the liberation struggles of Native Americans. Although a committed communist, she had spent some ten years, with her immediate family, in Stalin's labor camps and knew a little about oppression.

### THE STUDENT LIBERATORS

In his book on Alcatraz, Adam Fortunate Eagle tells us that "the driving force behind the occupation of Alcatraz" was the Bay Area Indian community's United Council, meeting at the Intertribal Friendship House; I remember it somewhat differently.<sup>4</sup> The Indian students from San Francisco State University and the University of California at Berkeley were key players in the 1969 drama from the beginning. I was present at Pier 39 with the students from UC Berkeley when Richard Oakes (Mohawk) read the Alcatraz Proclamation on 9 November 1969. The students held a more militant perspective than Fortunate Eagle and company, and that is why they boarded the ship to circle the island and then daringly decided to jump overboard to swim to Alcatraz; they were making their own statement. They were removed by U.S. marshals the following day but vowed they would return to build an independent Indian community. This they later did, more than eighty persons strong—men, women, and children—on 20 November 1969.

### BACKGROUND FACTORS

Several factors or events served to create a militant spirit among the students who contributed to taking Alcatraz Island in 1969: Indian protest books, for example, that the students were reading. These included Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* and Stan

Steiner's *The New Indians*, both published in 1969, as well as Edgar Cahn's *Our Brother's Keeper* and Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society* (about the Indian struggle in Canada), which came out about the same time.

Some of the students knew that Indian leaders of the past had been imprisoned on Alcatraz. Jack D. Forbes (Powhatan-Lenapi) included this in some of his writings, and I told my students about an elderly Tohono O'Odham (Papago) chief who refused to let his men register for the World War II draft, asserting instead his own Indian nationality and allegiance to Mexico. He was imprisoned on Alcatraz by the federal authorities and died shortly after his release, in part as a result of his imprisonment.

Before the occupation, both campuses were visited by an Iroquois traveling college, The White Roots of Peace, and the students saw the film on the Cornwall Bridge blockade entitled *You Are on Indian Land*. More importantly, strikes and demonstrations were taking place on the two campuses as part of the antiwar movement, and there was a six-week strike by Third World students at Berkeley to establish an ethnic studies department to offer relevant courses and meaningful programs for Native Americans and other minority students.<sup>5</sup> These events had an important impact on the mood and thinking of the Native American students, who were embittered by the termination and relocation policies of the U.S. government and the institutional racism they encountered at almost every turn, including in higher education.

United Native Americans (U.N.A.) and its spokesperson, Lehman ("Lee") Brightman, deserve some credit also. Jack D. Forbes, Lee Brightman (Lakota-Creek), Horace Spencer (Navajo), and I were the core of this group at the time of the Alcatraz occupation. Although Lee was not directly involved in the Alcatraz takeover, under his leadership U.N.A. certainly showed the Indian people of the San Francisco Bay Area some new methods of protest. Even before he became the director of the Native American studies program at Berkeley in the fall of 1969, Brightman incited Indians to picket the San Francisco federal building and other strategic places for Indian rights. One tactic he employed well was to get Indian student pickets out with signs, make a little noise, and then call in the press. This way he would catch the media's attention in order to address an important Indian issue and distribute a U.N.A. press release. He managed to break through the stereotype that militant protest "is not the Indian way."

U.N.A. published its newspaper, *Warpath*, before and during the Alcatraz events, giving excellent publicity and coverage to the "new Indian" movement. Students also read *The Renegade*, put out by Survival of the American Indians (Washington State fishing tribes). Of course, *Akwesasne Notes*, which had started publishing in 1968 after the Cornwall Bridge blockade, was an ever-inspiring source of news on the Indian struggle.

For a time, the National Indian Youth Council (N.I.Y.C.) was headquartered in the old Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, as was the Far West Laboratory for Research and Educational Development. Many of us referred to the latter as the "Far Out Lab," because the work of this government laboratory seemed so irrelevant to the needs of the minority community. The single noteworthy exception was Jack Forbes's department in minority research which, under his direction and authorship, produced excellent materials on African-American, Mexican-American, and Indian history and contributions to the Far West. It was Forbes who became the "father" of the new ethnic studies programs at UC Berkeley and, later, the program at UC Davis. In collaboration with the student activists at Berkeley, he drafted a well-reasoned proposal for an ethnic studies department at UC Berkeley embracing African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Indians. (A similar process took place on the San Francisco State campus under the leadership of Richard Oakes.) This development at Berkeley became a reality in October 1969, on the eve of the Alcatraz takeover. The ethnic studies proposal included a wide complement of course descriptions, as well as detailed budget breakdowns. Thus the "Far Out Lab" became a common meeting ground for N.I.Y.C. types such as Mel Thom and Clyde Warrior, along with Forbes and those associated with U.N.A. The California Indian Education Association, with Dave Risling at its helm, and Indian leaders and elders from the San Francisco Bay Area Indian community were not infrequent visitors. I was Forbes's research assistant for a time, until I entered graduate school at Berkeley, so I either witnessed or participated in many of these activities firsthand.

#### THE COURSE ON NATIVE AMERICAN LIBERATION

One of the courses developed by Forbes for the new Native American studies program at UC Berkeley was the class on Indian

liberation. During spring term, 1969, LaNada Boyer (Bannock-Shoshone—formerly LaNada Means) picketed during the Third World strike, Forbes developed the proposal for ethnic studies, Lee Brightman (also a Berkeley student) agitated under the U.N.A. banner, and Patty La Plant (formerly Patty Silvas, a California Indian) worked in student government to prepare the proper student paperwork. Boyer was the main Indian student activist on the Berkeley campus working for the establishment of an Indian studies program; she later became a leader in the Indians of All Tribes group on Alcatraz. By the summer session, Forbes had scouted out a basement room in a vacant university cottage at the north entrance to the campus, which the Berkeley Indian students then occupied (shades of things to come). It was there that we held our first Indian class, and it was there, also, that the Berkeley and San Francisco State students met and held a strategy session for taking Alcatraz. I remember especially Richard Oakes and Al Miller (Seminoles), although others may have been present from San Francisco State.

The course on Indian liberation was first taught in the summer of 1969, just before the Alcatraz takeover. Since the Native American studies program had not yet been finally approved by the university, anthropology professor Gerald Berreman sponsored our course. It offered anthropology credit then and in the fall term of 1969. I was a graduate teaching associate in the anthropology department at the time, so it was arranged that I would coordinate the class. Nevertheless, we were academically autonomous, and the course consisted mainly of guest lectures by Indian community people and spokespersons. By the fall term, I had accumulated enough material to begin teaching the course, but I still supplemented the syllabus with a couple of guest lectures. By winter term, the Ethnic Studies Department had been tentatively approved, the Native American studies program was off and running, and a new faculty member, Henrietta Mann (Cheyenne-Arapaho), took over the course. Henry, as Indian people affectionately call her, became the director of the Native American studies program the following year (after Lee Brightman's departure) and is, of course, well known today as a university educator and activist for Indian religious freedom.

The course description for the five-unit Native American studies (N.A.S.) 130 (Indian Liberation), reads in part, "An introduction to problems and processes involved in Native American efforts to liberate themselves, economically, sociopolitically, and

psychologically, from the effects of European conquest and class domination. Attention will focus upon the contemporary field of Indian affairs *and probable future developments* [emphasis added]. Attention will also be given to past Indian resistance and liberation movements." Halfway through the term, the Indian students, about one-quarter of the class, left to liberate Alcatraz. The class, of course, was not the cause of the Alcatraz occupation, but it did have an impact on the Berkeley students and their role in the occupation. I must say that the class really came alive once the Indian students liberated the island. The non-Indian students, both white and minority, who were enrolled in the class followed the news reports and developments avidly, and the Indian student liberators returned periodically to give firsthand reports and to answer questions. I gave all the Indian students "A" grades, as I recall; after all, they did not just study about Indian liberation but actually went out and did it!

One of the original student occupiers, Russell Waldon (Creek), who was also a member of the class, wrote on his final exam essay, "We considered many plans, many programs [in the class]. We felt the only positive way to create self-determination was to do it. If we failed, then we would continue to be wards of the federal government and would resign ourselves to our fate of incompetence."

#### PLANNING AND COORDINATING THE OCCUPATION

Although a planning meeting of the two student groups had taken place on the Berkeley campus earlier, I remember a really big meeting that was held in the Indian Community Action Program (C.A.P) office in San Francisco after the 9 November landing to plan for the return to Alcatraz. Al Miller directed this C.A.P. program from a rented storefront in the Mission district, not far from the San Francisco Indian Center (which had burned down). Karen Talbot (my wife) and I were present at this meeting, as were the Indian students from Berkeley; when the question arose of securing legal assistance in case of arrests, we put the group in touch with Aubrey Grossman, a personal friend who was a labor attorney in San Francisco. Grossman later defended the Pit River tribe in its land occupation case.

I was asked to coordinate the mainland activities for the forthcoming occupation, but I declined because of family and graduate

school responsibilities. Later, I was glad that I had turned down this assignment, because I saw what an exhausting task it was for Dean Chavers (Lumbee) when he took over the responsibility. Chavers, who was usually an agreeable person, became testy and rather unpleasant after working for days on end with little or no sleep. Telephone and other messages, money and donated supplies, technical assistance, and many other coordination tasks for Alcatraz support took place out of this C.A.P. storefront.

Karen Talbot was able to bring Alcatraz and the Indian issue to the forefront of the growing West Coast antiwar movement. Fall 1969 saw the largest anti-Vietnam War demonstrations this country had ever seen, with one-half million people turning out in New York City and 250,000 in San Francisco. My wife was on the program committee, which lined up speakers for the San Francisco rally in Golden Gate Park; in that capacity, she was able to lobby successfully for an American Indian representative in the speaker list lineup. This was no mean task, since everyone wanted to be represented on the speaker's platform for this mass demonstration composed of so many diverse groups united in a broad antiwar coalition. The Alcatraz planners decided on Iroquois traditional leader Wallace "Mad Bear" Anderson, who was then living in the Los Angeles area. I remember how proud the Indian students were to be able to sponsor and then to escort Mad Bear to the speaker's platform on that momentous day. From him one-quarter of a million people learned something about the Indian condition and Indian concerns. The Alcatraz planners had succeeded in bringing the Indian issue to the attention of the non-Indian activist community of San Francisco, thus contributing indirectly to the outpouring of support that materialized with the 20 November occupation.

#### THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT COMMITTEE

The last bit of history I wish to relate concerns the Academic Support Committee, which the Indians of All Tribes council asked me to set up and coordinate after their 20 November occupation, in order to garner support for the Alcatraz occupation among academic and professional people. In this capacity, I made a trip to the Stanford Research Institute near Palo Alto to contact anthropologists Sol Tax and Edward Dozier (Tewa), who were doing a year's stint at this academic "think tank." I was able to bring both



to the island for a visit and to counsel with the Indian occupiers. Tax was well known in the anthropology profession during the 1960s. He was editor of the prestigious international journal, *Current Anthropology*, and founder of the University of Chicago school of action anthropology. It was Tax who, along with Nancy Lurie, organized the 1960 Chicago Conference, with its important Declaration of Indian Purpose; from this conference, the younger, educated Indians went on to found the National Indian Youth Council.

Ed Dozier, the first Indian anthropologist to come along in decades, was doing very promising research and writing at the University of Arizona. His untimely death a few years later was a real loss to Indian scholarship.

Among others on this committee were Joe Muskrat, a promising Indian attorney, and, of course, Jack Forbes, who had taken an academic position at UC Davis. Forbes, however, and David Risling were shortly to lead the occupation of the old Nike missile base outside of Davis, which became D-Q University.

No sooner had Tax visited the island than he began to take over—sending telegrams, contacting the press, speaking for the island unilaterally; that is, he bypassed the authority of the Indians of All Tribes council and did not consult with other members of the committee. A powerhouse of energy and accustomed to being in command, he just could not let the Indians run their own occupation. Dozier, on the other hand, became thoughtfully silent and simply withdrew. I discussed the problem with the Indians of All Tribes council, and it was decided that the best solution was to simply “kill” the committee.

I do not believe that Tax ever forgave me when I stopped all communication with him and failed to reconvene the committee. Perhaps he thought I was simply incompetent, but he later got his revenge. At the 1975 international meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Amsterdam, he told the gathering of action anthropologists that he had just finished reading Deloria’s *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties*, and, noting its subtitle, *An Indian Declaration of Independence*, declared that, since this is what Indians want (he had just discovered this fact), anthropologists should take a leadership role in helping them achieve it.<sup>6</sup> He proposed, therefore, that action anthropologists call for another Chicago Conference like the one he had organized in 1961, draft a declaration of independence, and invite the Indians to adopt it. (He apparently had overlooked the fact that the Twenty Point Pro-

gram put forth by the Trail of Broken Treaties coalition in 1972 was just such a document.) I found his proposal incredibly patronizing and told him so publicly, after which he denounced me as "an enemy of the Indian people." Although he later apologized to me privately, I found the incident a sad example of the paternalistic view held by the old guard anthros toward American Indians. The anthropology community as a whole was silent about Alcatraz.

On the other hand, there was Mina Caufield, now an associate professor of women's studies at San Francisco State University. Both of us were graduate students in anthropology at UC Berkeley in the 1960s. At the time of the Alcatraz occupation, she was a leader of the Teaching Assistants Union (A.F.T.) at Berkeley, which organized a picket line on campus in support of our Third World strike to establish the Ethnic Studies Department. She and other union members were arrested for their efforts by the same police who arrested and beat up Indians and other minority students during the strike.

Mina and her husband owned a beautiful sailing vessel, the *Saturna*, which became the chief supply ship for the Alcatraz occupation. I went along on a couple of their many trips when Tom was running the coast guard blockade in order to take supplies, people, and barrels and barrels of water to the island. It was dangerous and exciting. Today, the *Saturna* is the flagship of the Bay Area Peace Navy, which demonstrates against munitions ships and war-related activities. Mina and Tom never tried to tell Indians what to do, but they were always there to assist when they were needed.

## RETROSPECT

In my 1978 paper on Alcatraz (cited earlier), I highlighted the Indian student subculture and its ethos or themes of liberation. These eight themes remain valid today: self-determination; all-Indian unity; equal educational opportunity; cultural revitalization; mutual assistance among Indian people; changes to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indians' relationship to the U.S. government; peaceful coexistence among "two-leggeds" and with the natural world (ecology); and the rebuilding of the land base for Indian self-sufficiency. Since then, of course, the desecration and religious freedom issues have become of paramount concern. Nevertheless, we can see that the 1969 Alcatraz occupation served

to craft an all-Indian program several years before the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties issued its important Twenty Point Program.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the credit for this contribution lies with the Indian student liberators of San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley. As I stated in my conclusions to the 1978 article,

Free Alcatraz was one of the first of the current Native American land occupations. The activist students dared hope that indigenous peoples and nations of the United States might sever the bonds of their oppression and take control of their own destiny. The tremendous outpouring of sympathy and support by non-Indians for Alcatraz indicate that the general public understood the democratic nature of the demands . . . .

Alcatraz [also] became a testing ground for its [Indian student] participants. Great experimentation took place, and a militant cadre was formed.<sup>8</sup>

It is this student component of the “new Indian” movement of the 1960s and early 1970s—of which the Alcatraz occupation was an important episode—that needs further documentation and analysis.

#### NOTES

1. See Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz! The Indian Occupation of 1969–1971* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1992); and Troy Johnson, *The Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island, Indian Self-Determination, and the Rise of Indian Activism* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

2. Steve Talbot, “Free Alcatraz: The Culture of Native American Liberation,” *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 6:3 (Fall 1978): 83–96.

3. Talbot, “Free Alcatraz,” *Soviet Ethnography* 5 (1977): 60–70. (In Russian.)

4. Fortunate Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!* 26.

5. See Talbot, “Why the Native American Heritage Should Be Taught in College,” *The Indian Historian* 7:1 (Winter 1974): 42–44.

6. Vine Deloria, Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Talbot, “Free Alcatraz: The Culture of Native American Liberation,” 94.