

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Native Struggle for Liberation: Alcatraz

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6n4624j5>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Forbes, Jack D.

Publication Date

1994-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Native Struggle for Liberation: Alcatraz

JACK D. FORBES

INTRODUCTION

The liberation of Alcatraz Island by Native Americans in November 1969 occurred when I had just started teaching newly developed courses in our brand-new Native American studies program at the University of California, Davis. I was engaged in the political work of securing additional teaching positions, writing up a major, setting up a student community center (Tecumseh Center), securing adequate space, and all of the other things needed to bring our dreams to reality. I had just moved to Davis from Berkeley in July, and my energy was focused on prying resources loose from administrators and crossing swords with faculty committees.

Several of our Davis students went down to Alcatraz immediately, and some of my fellow members of United Native Americans were among the leaders of the Alcatraz community. I began to realize the unique importance of Alcatraz, even though I personally was only a supporter and visitor, never an occupier. Alcatraz was perhaps the first Indian-controlled “free” piece of real estate within the United States since the whites had conquered southwestern Colorado and southwestern Utah in 1910–15 and assumed control over interior Alaska during the same general period. One thing that made Alcatraz so significant was

Jack D. Forbes is a professor and the chair of the Department of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis.

the fact that, when you left the pier, you left the United States and soon arrived on a native-ruled island, temporarily beyond the jurisdiction of any white authorities. Another significant aspect of Alcatraz was that it liberated the psyche of native peoples, making it "all right to be Indian, headbands and all." Finally, it was an experiment in native self-determination in a communal and political sense.

But Alcatraz developed at a peculiar point in time, a time when many Indians still believed that alcohol and drugs were essential parts of modern native culture and that it was necessary to tolerate drunken behavior. At the same time, however, a return to spiritual values was also occurring. On Alcatraz a great cultural clash took place between booze and the sacred pipe, between drugs and spiritual ceremonies, between hustling and traditional tribal ethics.

The native world learned a great deal from this struggle of values, and, slowly but surely, alcohol and commercial drugs have been barred from ceremonies, gatherings, powwows, and other important functions of contemporary native life. This has made a major change in the quality of Indian communal life in many parts of North America. The Alcatraz experience was a pivotal one in terms of forcing Indian activists to consider spiritual values and the necessity of confronting alcohol head-on if the movement was to avoid self-destruction.

My comments are going to be based primarily on my memory of the Alcatraz period, supplemented by a "chronology of Native American history," which we put together at Tecumseh Center in 1971.

THE RISE OF NATIVE ACTIVISM

The return of veterans from World War II has sometimes been regarded as important in the development of modern native activism, to which I would add the return of Korean War vets and, later, Vietnam-era vets. The movement of tens of thousands of Indians to cities such as San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago is also important, as is the growing number of college and university graduates from the 1950s onward, with a much larger number of college students during the 1960s and 1970s.

Activism takes many forms. I believe that it really began with the more traditional native people who were determined to

protect their land and way of life and practice their religion. Thus I would trace Alcatraz back to the revival of the Sun Dance by the Arapaho and the Sioux in the 1946–50 period, to the beginnings of modern Hopi and Six Nations resistance to outside interference in 1948–49, and to the struggles of the 1957–68 period involving mostly Six Nations groups and “traditionalists” from the Hopi, Miccosukee, Pit River, Western Shoshone, and other nations.

In the 1950s, the various reservations of the Six Nations Confederacy began to come under increasing assault. In 1954, the New York Port Authority seized some land belonging to the Akwesasne (St. Regis) Mohawk Reservation; from 1956, a federal project, the Kinzua Dam, threatened to flood the Allegheny Seneca Reservation.

The Six Nations people began to react to these threats with new techniques and a revived sense of native nationalism. In 1957, for example, Standing Arrow of the Mohawk led a group of Indians onto lands claimed by non-Indians on Schoharie Creek. The Mohawk claimed the land under the Treaty of 1784. Thus, we find the use of “occupation” and a reference to “treaty rights,” both essential to the Alcatraz movement twelve years later.

Alliances of “traditionalists” began to develop across the country, with groups such as LONAI (League of North American Indians) and the Indian Defense League providing some leadership. LONAI published a newsletter (*Indian Views*), which was widely distributed among traditionalists.

Around 1958, things began to heat up. The state of New York threatened to levy state income taxes from the Akwesasne Mohawk, the New York Power Authority invaded the Tuscarora Reservation to confiscate land for a power facility, and a reclamation project and non-Indian land grabbers endangered the Miccosukee of Florida. Mad Bear Anderson and Chief Clinton Rickard organized resistance efforts around the country. Fidel Castro of Cuba invited Six Nations and Miccosukee delegates to visit Cuba, which they did in July 1958.

During 1959, the activism continued, with Six Nations delegates being joined by Chief Julius Twohy and Ella McCurely from Utah in a meeting with the Miccosukee in the Florida Everglades. A “United Indian Nation” was to be organized. One messenger (Craig was his name, as I recall) visited us in Los Angeles at a first meeting of the Southwestern Branch of the American Indian Ethnohistoric Conference. He and his wife were carrying the message of native reawakening around the country;

he also wrote articles for *Indian Views*. In that same year, Chief Ray Johnson of the Pit River Nation died in Washington, D.C., while picketing for recognition of his people's land rights, and a Hopi delegation visited the United Nations in New York, explaining their prophecies and beliefs.

Thus, in 1958–59, we saw a great awakening among traditional First Nations people, from New York to California, and from Ontario to Florida. The movement broadened in the early 1960s to include some tribal officials, the children of “progressives,” and other kinds of indigenous people. In June 1961, the Chicago American Indian Conference brought together 460 persons from ninety tribes. Out of this came a “Declaration of Indian Purpose.” In August, the National Indian Youth Council was organized by Clyde Warrior, Melvin Thom, Herbert Blatchford, and others who had been in Chicago. The NIYC became a leading voice for younger Indian people during the 1961–67 period. Slightly later, the Native American Movement was organized in the Los Angeles-Ventura area of California, bringing together Chicano-Mexicanos, Chumash, and urban tribal people. NAM developed a series of militant position papers, while NIYC published *American Aborigine* and *Americans Before Columbus*.

In 1963, the fishing rights treaty struggle commenced in Washington State. From 1960 to 1961, the American Indian College Committee, led by Carl and Mary Gorman and me, began working for the creation of native-controlled colleges, a university, and a native studies program.

In 1964, Survival of the American Indians was organized in Washington State. It became the cutting edge for indigenous resistance in the Pacific Northwest, soon to be followed by a “Red Power” movement in British Columbia. In the East, Six Nations people continued to struggle, and in 1968 the Akwesasne Mohawk staged their famous blockade of traffic across an international bridge in order to stand up for treaty rights.

During this period, Rarihokwats and others established a newspaper called *Akwesasne Notes*, which became a major voice of indigenous resistance around the world. The American Indian Movement was born as a local organization in Minneapolis, later spreading into the upper Midwest and northern Plains areas. In 1969, traditionalist-nationalist First Nations people gathered on the Tonawanda and Onondaga reservations, and then, on 26 August, some one thousand native people from fifty different nations of the U.S., Canada, and Central America met as a part of

the North American Unity Convention. On the West Coast, more than one thousand indigenous people gathered at an old Haida village to ceremonially erect the first totem pole since Christian missionaries had tried to suppress native culture there.

In California, 1967–69 was also a very active period, with indigenous people becoming increasingly confident and militant. In 1967, California Indian people, led by David Risling, Jr., organized the first grassroots native-controlled education organization in the country, the California Indian Education Association. The CIEA became a major force in West Coast affairs and a model for the National Indian Education Association. California Indian Legal Services was also organized (1968) by CIEA leaders and others. A more militant group was United Native Americans (1968), organized by me, Lehman Brightman, LaNada (Means) Boyer, Horace Spencer, Belva Cottier, Muriel Waukazoo, Stella Leach, Carmen Christy, and many others. For about four years, UNA published *Warpath*, a uniquely militant and traditionalist newspaper. UNA picketed OEO offices in San Francisco, forcing the release of money for the Neighborhood Friendship House. Many UNA members went on to become leaders during the Alcatraz struggle.

An important series of events at this time was the U.S. Senate Indian Education Subcommittee hearings held at the San Francisco American Indian Center and chaired by Senator Robert Kennedy. Organized by Senate aide Adrian Parmeter and me, the hearings provided an opportunity for California native people to testify. I also helped organize a visit by helicopter to the Stewart's Point Reservation School, an all-Indian school north of the Russian River. Senator Kennedy met with the teacher-superintendent, the children and their families, as well as with me and other First Nations people. The Kennedy visit was one among many events that served to alert Bay Area indigenous people to their potential as activists.

In 1969, native students, including Richard Oakes, joined the Third World Strike at San Francisco State University. In the spring of 1969, the U.C. Berkeley chapter of UNA joined the Third World Strike on that campus and pushed for the creation of a Native American studies program. UNA located a vacant facility on the campus and occupied it, securing it as a student center and office. Leaders in this effort were LaNada (Means) Boyer, Patty Silvas, Carmen Christy, Steve Talbot, Horace Spencer, and me. The strikes at both UC Berkeley and San Francisco State helped to train

indigenous students in militant strategy and gave them a great deal of self-confidence. The occupation of an office at Berkeley also set a direct precedent for Alcatraz. Richard Oakes and several other San Francisco State students met with UNA people in the "liberated" office during the period prior to the landings on Alcatraz.

The San Francisco Bay Area had many very active organizations during this period, including the Bay Area Native American Council, the Intertribal Friendship House of Oakland, the San Francisco American Indian Center, the San Jose American Indian Council, Bay Area Indian Health, the Indian Well-Baby Clinic, California Indian Legal Services, UNA, the American Indian Historical Society, and others. Native Californians were active in CIEA, CILS, and, to some extent, UNA. First Nations people from other states were often divided along tribal lines. Many Sioux people, for example, did not always support the Bay Area Native American Council because it was led by Adam Nordwall (Fortunate Eagle), an Ojibway. Nordwall, who ran his own pest extermination business, was a leading organizer of powwows in the area.

The year 1969 was one of awakened militancy and vigor in the Bay Area indigenous community. A new native studies program commenced in the fall at the University of California, Berkeley, led by Lehman Brightman of UNA. (I had turned down the job in order to start a similar program at U.C. Davis, because CIEA members preferred a rural campus.) All kinds of marches, sit-ins, protests, planning sessions, and negotiations had taken place at San Francisco State and U.C. Berkeley, and a cadre of students and supporters were available on the two campuses and at the San Francisco American Indian Center.

It was in this atmosphere that, on 9–10 November, a small group of Native Americans landed on Alcatraz. They stayed only a short time, but, on 20 November, a group of fourteen First Nations people went back to the island, followed the next day by eighty to one hundred Native Americans belonging to at least twenty tribes. By 28 November, it is said that there were at least four hundred people on "the rock." Prominent among the Alcatraz leaders were many veterans of the San Francisco State strike and of UNA, including Richard Oakes, Stella Leach, and LaNada (Means) Boyer. A great deal of initial credit must go to BANAC leader Adam Nordwall, but any occupation, if it is to endure, must involve large numbers of people.

Soon after the occupation took a solid hold, I wrote an article entitled "Alcatraz: What Its Seizure Means to Indian People." This article, which appeared in newspapers in California, began by noting,

In the 1870's Natchez Winnemucca, respected Chief of the Pyramid Lake Paiutes, was arrested and sent as a prisoner to Alcatraz. His crime: attempting to resist and expose the corruption of the government's agents on his reservation. Natchez did not stay on "The Rock" very long, but other Indians, guilty of the "crime" of resisting white conquest, were frequent visitors to the prison. Now, in 1969, modern-day Native Americans are attempting to claim Alcatraz Island in order to both obtain facilities for educational programs and to publicize the desperate circumstances under which the Indian people are living.

I went on to argue that indigenous people had a right to occupy Alcatraz on the basis of the aboriginal rights of native California people. I wanted to provide a firm legal basis for their right to be on the island, which I found in the original title of the Muwekma and other California native people. My article concluded,

The Native Americans on Alcatraz are saying that *they* want to have a place where *they* can control programs which will benefit both Indians and non-Indians. Those who can see into the future will agree, I think, that an Indian museum, memorial and educational center on Alcatraz will be of great benefit and value to all Californians, regardless of race!

Not long before the Alcatraz occupation, I had become aware that a 640-acre facility near Davis, California, was to become surplus. This communications facility had several usable buildings and good agricultural land, and was located in a rural area within sight of sacred Pupunia (Mount Diablo) to the south, the sacred Maidu Buttes (Three Peaks) to the north, Berryessa Peak to the west, and the Sierra Nevadas to the east. We organized a board of trustees for D-Q University and applied for the 640 acres under surplus property procedures. In the end, we had the only complete application, but the federal government decided to award the land to the University of California, Davis, whose application was unsigned and legally incomplete.

In any event, on the night of 3 November 1970, native students from U.C. Davis climbed over the fence and began the peaceful

occupation of D-Q University, logistically supported by Chicano students. People from Alcatraz came to help, but it remained primarily a student occupation during the first crucial weeks. Finally, in April 1971, we secured a deed to the site, and D-Q University got under way. It has been operating ever since.

There are many relationships between D-Q University and Alcatraz. For one thing, I had developed proposals for an indigenous university in the early 1960s and had refined them over the years, with input from grassroots native people from all over. I am sure that my ideas must have influenced LaNada (Means) Boyer and others who called for the creation of an Indian university on Alcatraz. But Alcatraz was not the best place for a college because of its lack of agricultural land and suitable buildings, and its damp climate and inaccessibility. Those of us who were trying to create the university saw the communications facility as offering a much superior location.

In a very real sense, D-Q University represents both a predecessor to and a continuation of Alcatraz. Recognition of the need for a native-controlled center for education and rebirth, foreseen by the founders of the American Indian College Committee in 1961 and before that by stalwart fighters such as Sarah Winnemucca and Luther Standing Bear and asserted by United Native Americans in the newspaper *Warpath* (as well as in speeches and conferences), contributed to what happened on Alcatraz Island.

Alcatraz turned out to be much more than a media event. We owe a great deal to the occupiers, especially to those who hung on and who tried to build a community for Indians of all tribes. Alcatraz has become a special place for all indigenous people, because it still lives, not only at D-Q University, not only in the San Francisco Bay Area, but on every reservation and in every urban center in North America—in fact, I would venture to say, all around the world, wherever indigenous people have decided to dig in their heels and struggle for self-determination.

Thanks go to Adam, to Richard, to LaNada, and to all of the others who helped to make Alcatraz a symbol of hope for native peoples!