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The Native American Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Radio and Rhetoric

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1.1 Introduction

From November 1969 to June 1971, Native American protesters occupied Alcatraz Island, drawing attention to the unjust treatment of indigenous populations and the hardships they faced. Since the colonization of the Western Hemisphere, Amerindians have endured great injustices and difficulties. The arrival of Europeans brought about land seizures, broken treaties, massacres, and oppression for Native populations. It should be noted that the mistreatment of Native Americans is both a historical and modern problem. The rampant and perpetual abuse of Native Americans led to the marginalization and devaluation of indigenous populations. This substandard treatment has had lasting effects on Native American nations. In the modern era, Native Americans face “chronic conditions of poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment within their communities.”¹

In the years preceding the occupation, numerous governmental policies were enacted which immensely disturbed reservation life and altered the conditions of Native Americans throughout the United States. Notably, between 1953 and 1962, the federal government passed twelve termination bills.³ Termination policy sought to dissolve tribal nations and eliminated federal responsibility and protections for reservations.⁴ Concurrently, the federal government and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) pushed for relocation.⁵ This policy encouraged migration from reservations to urban centers.⁶ Together, termination and relocation policies led to a dramatic shift in the Native American population distribution and supported the assimilation rather than the protection of indigenous cultures within an Anglocentric nation. These governmental plans added tension to the already turbulent relationship between Amerindians and the government. Protesters on Alcatraz Island sought to draw attention to both the long-standing and new injustices facing indigenous groups.

The occupation of Alcatraz was led by an organization known as Indians Of All Tribes.⁷ This group utilized satire and comparison to discuss the conditions of Native American populations.⁸ In the proclamation issued by the group upon seizure of the land, they stated that they chose to occupy Alcatraz because it “resembles most Indian reservations: it lacked running water, sanitation, transportation, minerals, industry, agriculture, and educational facilities.”⁹ By choosing to Alcatraz Island, a nationally recognized landmark, protesters were attempting to familiarize the public with the conditions of reservations. Comparing a known item, Alcatraz, to a something largely unknown to the general public, reservations, makes it easier for a national audience to understand and possibly sympathize with the protesters' cause. Additionally, Indians of All Tribes satirically presented their seizure of the land to draw attention to historical injustices. The group said that they would purchase the Island for “twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red clothe” which they stated was equivalent to what Native Americans were given for Manhattan Island, adjusted for inflation.¹⁰ This satirical connection focuses attention on the unjust treatment of Native Americans in colonial times and suggests that their actions were justified by such treatment. Their logic in this offer is that since they were wronged, they should be granted retribution or means for ameliorated conditions. Additionally, the use of satire appeals to the interest of the general public and is aimed to gain support.

Throughout the nineteen months of occupation, protesters received much attention from the media. While in theory, this attention and recognition was beneficial, the media presented the story in a largely negative light. Upon review of the literature, it becomes evident that the media used racist and poor journalist practices to diminish the protest. To counter outside lenses and motives, occupiers released their news via radio. Despite their effort, most all information the general public received on the matter came from large news organizations. Though it may not

have been the primary conduit of information for many, the radio broadcasts produced on the Island shed light on the sentiments and intentions of a variety of occupiers. Evaluating these recordings reveals the protesters' dedication, struggles, and hopes. Furthermore, an analysis of these radio broadcasts reinforces and supports the notion of a disconnect between the protesters and the media. Understanding this divide and these journalistic tendencies in the presentation of minorities may allow for a greater understanding of contemporary race and media relations. A comparative analysis of selected *Radio Free Alcatraz* broadcasts and selected releases from the news media of the time demonstrates a dichotomy in the presentation of the situation and reveals a series of discriminatory tendencies in the portrayal of Native Americans.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 The Government and Native Americans

There has long been a troubled relationship between the federal government and tribal nations. In attempts to repair this relationship and improve reservations following the Great Depression, the Indian New Deal was enacted.¹¹ This program sought to facilitate economic growth, autonomy, and self-governance within reservations.¹² While it was successful in some instances, it was problematic in that it attempted to apply a rather standardized plan to a number of communities facing different issues.¹³ In the following decades, the federal government adopted a reactionary agenda, favoring assimilation to autonomy. House Concurrent Resolution 108, also known as the 1953 Termination Act, eliminated all special protections and rights derived from treaties between the federal government and a number of tribal nations.¹⁴ Native Americans from the reservations affected by this termination act and those following it became subject to "the same... privileges and responsibilities as are applicable to other citizens of the United States."¹⁵ Many individuals were discontented with termination as it largely altered and

jeopardized their communities. Reservation lands in these areas were no longer protected with trust status, rather they were reclassified as taxable private holdings.¹⁶ This meant that reservations and properties within them were now subject to foreclosure.¹⁷ Termination policy attempted to suddenly restructure reservations in a way that threatened the way of life of an already marginalized group.

Further endangering the culture and impeding on the lifestyle of reservation communities, the federal government also pushed relocation policies in this era. The BIA spearheaded a massive campaign to relocate Native Americans from reservations to urban centers.¹⁸ Relocation officers “were encouraged and pressured to enlist as many people as possible [which] suggested that the greatest emphasis [of the program] was on quantity.”¹⁹ Glenn Emmons, the commissioner of the BIA from 1953 to 1961, urged Congress to increase funding to the relocation initiative under the premise that it would decrease long term BIA spending.²⁰ Officials from this administration attempted to decrease reservation populations with relocation programs instead of attempting to improve reservation conditions. For many, relocation was viewed as a “desperate last resort... [to escape] the many personal, family, and financial problems that are the concomitants of reservations and rural poverty.”²¹ Ultimately, relocation was aimed to rid “the government of an unwanted responsibility [rather] than in improving the status of Native Americans.”²²

These extreme policies and initiatives led to a rise in Native American activism and paved the way for the occupation of Alcatraz. While the aforementioned policies were mostly enacted in the 1950s, they were still largely affecting Native Americans throughout the following decades. In 1970 for the first time, the Native American population in urban areas surpassed that of rural areas.²³ This demonstrates the immense scope and effect of relocation efforts. Though

this population shift was harmful to tribal bonds and communities, immersion in the urban atmosphere during the civil rights movement inspired a rise in Native American activism.²⁴ The occupation of Alcatraz Island is a byproduct of long-standing and growing tensions and exposure to other minority groups and their activism.

1.2.2 The News Media and Native Americans

A review of the literature reveals that protesters and the media functioned as opposing forces in the depiction of the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island. Malia Wollan states that the seizure of the Island was the beginning of an unprecedented era of Native American activism.²⁵ Additionally, she asserts that the occupation served largely to unify Native Americans in support of their rights and in celebration of their cultures.²⁶ While this was debatably protesters' main intention, most large media organizations produced a rather different picture of the occupation. David Milner, in his paper, states that at the beginning of the protest, the press largely reported that it was all a "delightful stunt."²⁷ This notion ignored the protesters' goals and ambitions entirely. Furthermore, this language exemplifies the condescending and derogatory image presented by the press. As the protest wore on, the media went from trivializing protesters to degrading them and their efforts completely. The press portrayed occupiers as a "threat to white society" and referred to them as "angry Indians" and "red men."²⁸ These claims and terms are far from objective. This verbiage displays bias and racist tendencies that have long been present in the news media's depiction of Native Americans.

Historically, in an attempt to counter and avoid the negative portrayal of their people in the media, indigenous populations have distributed their own news. In her paper, "Guardians of the Indian Image," Monica Butler analyzes the chronology of Native American activism regarding the media and television. She states that it has long been the goal of many Native

American groups to seize control of the “Indian image” and to end the racist portrayal of their people.²⁹ As early as 1828 with the release of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, a newspaper produced by the Cherokee people, Native Americans have fought to evade racism and injustice in the news and media.³⁰ During the occupation of Alcatraz Island, protesters continued in this tradition by circulation their own news through press releases and the radio series, *Radio Free Alcatraz*, which was broadcasted from the Island.

1.3 News Media Coverage

Though occupiers viewed their cause as important and serious, the news media tended to trivialize their efforts and agenda. *The Times-Picayune* reflected upon the early stages of the protest and asserted that “the seizure had captured the fancy of the world.”³¹ In using the word “fancy” the newspaper article asserts the idea that the occupation was insubstantial.³² Moreover, this diction serves to juvenilize the protesters; this statement reduces their efforts to a stunt. In the same vein, within a news broadcast Spenser Michaels, a reporter, stated that the seizure of the Island was the protesters’ attempt to “dramatize what they consider their sorry plight.”³³ While this statement acknowledges the occupiers’ agenda to a degree, it entirely rejects their claims and devalues their mission. The quote recognizes that the protesters are seeking to discuss their burdens, but in qualifying these issues as a “sorry plight” the reporter seeks to demerit the claims and goals of the protest.³⁴ Furthermore, this statement demeans not only the protesters but also Native Americans at large. By blatantly rejecting the assertions of the protesters, this statement denies the many social and economic hardships faced by many Native American communities.

Common among the misconceptions spread by the media was the idea that the protesters were violent. Nearing the end of the protest, *The Times-Picayune* stated that there was an ever-

increasing probability of violence.³⁵ They justified this claim by asserting that the remaining protesters were “violence-prone individuals” and that on the island “things declined rapidly.”³⁶ While they asserted that violence was likely and characteristic of the protesters, there was no reference within the article to any specific incident of violence on the island. Lacking evidence, this claim of imminent violence can be attributed to ethnic stereotyping. The paper also noted that the protesters were living in “ever... growing squalor.”³⁷ This phrase serves to present protesters as an increasingly barbaric and primitive people. The term “squalor” connotes a noncivilized and nonpeaceful environment. In presenting the protesters as such, the press drew upon the notion that indigenous peoples and cultures are savage and primitive. As once again there was no offer of proof to support this claim, it may be viewed as the result of ethnocentricity.

Perpetuating the notion that the protesters were violent and primitive, *The Oregonian* asserts in a 1970 article, that three individuals were killed in conjunction with the protest.³⁸ The paper includes reference to these deaths and includes them in a list of the causes that they attributed to the decline of the protest; “Bickering, disillusionment, [and] three deaths.”³⁹ Though the claim that there were three deaths is technically true, the newspaper attempts to downplay the details of these tragedies and pin fault upon the protesters. It should be noted that all three deaths were accidents and were not directly caused by the protest itself. Twelve-year-old Yvonne Oaks fell down three flights of stairs and died from sustained injuries.⁴⁰ Additionally, two men were killed in a car accident while en route to deliver supplies to the protesters.⁴¹ The motor accident was the result of a heart attack experienced by the driver.⁴² The article includes little information on these deaths apart from the information included herein. While all of these deaths were tragic, they were not caused by protesters or by involvement in the protest. Moreover, these deaths were

not the result of violence. However, in focusing on the deaths rather than their contexts, the article encourages the reader to consider the protesters dangerous. The notion that the protesters were violent is unfounded and largely ignores their message and intents. Additionally, this view is representative of historical misrepresentation of Native Americans by the media. As there were no noted incidents of violence on the island during the occupation, these claims can be considered as a byproduct of racial stereotyping and discrimination.

The media also portrayed the occupation as a haphazard event. It was commonly reported that the occupiers were without a strong organization or plan. *The Mobile Register* referred to protesters as a “bitter, disorganized” group.⁴³ This description asserts that the protesters were both poorly structured and that their spirit was negative and self-serving. *The Oregonian* also attributed the decline of occupier population to a lack of interest.⁴⁴ They concluded that “bickering, disillusionment,” and “boredom cuts ranks.”⁴⁵ In asserting these things as the cause of the gradual end of the protest, the paper chooses to only paint a partial picture. The article solely addresses issues which can be attributed to the protesters; it fails to acknowledge the poor infrastructure, limited supplies, and other environmental problems faced by the protesters. In doing this, the paper asserts that the protest experienced decline due solely to the occupiers’ lack of organization and planning.

All together these negative media tendencies and notions served to sensationalize the protest and villainize the protesters. In describing the protesters as trivial, violent, and unorganized, the media portrayed them as antagonistic. The main reoccurring attributes used by the mainstream media to describe the protesters created the idea that their disruption of society was not for the communal good, but rather for selfish gain. It is relatively easy to see that the

media's negative view of protesters is not compatible with their projected image of social progress and cultural appreciation.

1.4 Protesters' Self-Presentation

From the Island, protesters released a radio news program known as *Radio Free Alcatraz*. Originally, this program was referred to as *Aircheck Alcatraz*.⁴⁶ The name “*Radio Free Alcatraz*” associates the program with *Radio Free Europe*. Founded in 1949, *Radio Free Europe* is an American funded radio channel which broadcasts in Europe.⁴⁷ During the Cold War, this radio channel, along with other American stations abroad, including *Voice of America*, *Radio in the American Sector*, and *Armed Forces Network*, were considered by some to be “broadcast[ing] freedom.”⁴⁸ While there is controversy over the efficacy of these radio stations and American involvement in foreign affairs, protesters sought to convey the same idea of freedom and liberty in their programming as was associated with *Radio Free Europe*.

This program was transmitted by the Pacifica Network from roughly December 22, 1969 to September 3, 1970.⁴⁹ Many of the episodes have been lost, and today, the Pacifica Radio Archives only has physical copies of 39 episodes from this series, and there are only approximately four digitalized episodes in existence.⁵⁰ These broadcasts served to provide coverage of the protest in a manner true to occupiers' intents. While these releases have been referred to in existing literature, there is little existing analysis of these radio broadcasts. Reviewing these sources allows for a more thorough understanding of the protest and protesters. Moreover, they allow for a better understanding of the divide between “white society” and indigenous populations.⁵¹ Grasping this divide and the long growing tensions between these two groups provides a more holistic understanding of the Alcatraz occupation, the Red Power Movement, and ongoing social strife.

1.4.1 The Broadcast's Introduction

Cree singer/songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie's song, "Now That the Buffalo's Gone" served as the anthem of the *Radio Free Alcatraz* and conveys many of the protesters' sentiments. The program typically commenced with a brief introduction from a representative of the Pacifica Network.⁵² Then the lilting voice of Sainte-Marie sang "Now That the Buffalo's Gone."⁵³ The lyrics called for the listeners to "remember the times you held your head high and told all of your friends of your Indian claims."⁵⁴ It continues, "oh it has been written in books and in songs that we have been mistreated and wronged."⁵⁵ In calling attention to both the joys and pains of Native American heritages, the song is able to convey the perspective of protesters simply and beautifully.

Occupiers of Alcatraz aspired to come together in celebration and promotion of their culture and to draw attention to the historic and ongoing mistreatment they faced. Speaking to this mistreatment, Sainte-Marie sings, "when a war between nations is lost, the loser we know pays the costs" and "treaties are broken again and again."⁵⁶ To address the common misconception that injustice is a matter of antiquity she continues "oh it's all in the past you say, but it's still going on here today."⁵⁷ Together these lines simply and artistically illustrate the sentiments of occupiers. They state that there has been historical disrespect and discrimination of indigenous populations, and such poor treatment remains a large issue. Taken as a whole, Buffy Sainte-Marie's song "Now That the Buffalo's Gone," serves as an expressive and comprehensive conduit to convey the views of protesters on Alcatraz and to transition into a deeper discussion of the issues at hand.

Countering the notion that the protest was unsubstantial and insignificant, *Radio Free Alcatraz* made a constant and concerted effort to establish the sincerity of everyone involved in

the occupation. John Trudell, the host of the radio program, typically began the broadcast by asking each guest a similar series of questions aimed to assert the seriousness of the protest. He inquired on such matters as “when did you come out to Alcatraz” and “how long do you plan on staying.”⁵⁸ With these questions, Trudell sought to illustrate the determination and motives of the occupiers who appeared on the show. Furthermore, they reinforce the import of the protest as they demonstrate the devotion people felt the occupation deserved. Each respondent conveyed a similar sense of determination and dedication. Jonny BearCub, an eighteen-year-old Assiniboiné Sioux from the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana, replied, “I plan on staying till we get the Island, or at least until we get word from the government”.⁵⁹ On a later broadcast, Bernell Blindman, a Sioux from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, says he has been on the Island “since they first landed,” and he intends to stay “until they get it”.⁶⁰ These answers show the earnestness and sincerity of the occupiers. They illuminate a simple, strong, and pure desire for change and belief in their cause. In the face of rather extreme governmental action aimed to restructure and permanently alter their way of life, the protesters approached the occupation with a sense of urgency and sincerity.

1.4.2 Content of the Broadcasts

In order to relay the merit occupiers felt the protest held, John Trudell emphasized the sacrifices individuals made to be there. Prominent among these sacrifices was the choice to delay one's education. Individuals who chose to postpone their own collegiate education to participate in the protest did so with the belief that they were paving the way for others to gain increased access to quality education. The aforementioned Jonny BearCub turned down a scholarship to Brigham Young University in order to more fully pursue an education revolving around Native American culture and history.⁶¹ Moreover, BearCub decided to postpone her higher education

altogether in order to participate in the occupation.⁶² Another occupier, Bernell Blindman also chose to postpone his education to join the protest.⁶³ Prior to occupation, he had completed two quarters at Berkley.⁶⁴ There he sought to obtain a degree in social welfare in order to advocate his reservation and bring about improved conditions for that community.⁶⁵ These two young individuals both chose to embrace personal sacrifices in hopes of bringing about a better future for their reservations and peoples. Moreover, as these two -- like many of the protesters -- were rather young, highlighting these sacrifices portrays them and the occupation as mature.

Additionally, Douglas Remington, “a Southern Ute from Denver,” abandoned his doctoral program in order to join the protest.⁶⁶ On the Island, he worked to establish a private school system with grades first through sixth.⁶⁷ He stated that “I thought why not... It was a good opportunity to give a piece of myself... I enjoy doing this... I was very fortunate... so consequently, I feel that I that I owe a great deal to Indians.”⁶⁸ Each of these individuals, BearCub, Blindman, and Remington, chose to place their communities and people before themselves. In showcasing these individuals on the radio program, the protest gained an air of selflessness and sincerity.

Some protesters gave up more than their education. Grace Thorpe served as a public relation correspondent for the protest.⁶⁹ To take on this position she had to leave her home and life in Arizona.⁷⁰ This was a sacrifice she was willing to make. On the matter, Thorpe stated, “I don’t feel that I’m really giving up too much. I feel that I’m probably gaining many things along the way.”⁷¹ She went on to emphasize the significance of the protest by saying, “important things happen here almost every minute.”⁷² She, like many other protesters, was ready to leave her community, her state, and her people, hoping that she may be able to aid those groups by participating in the occupation. Viewed together, Grace Thorpe, Jonny BearCub, Bernell

Blindman, and Douglas Remington demonstrate the immense sacrifices and selflessness of the protesters on Alcatraz. They placed the future of a great many people before their present plans and comfort. These individuals brought a spirit of magnanimousness and sincerity to the occupation of Alcatraz that allowed for an increased sense of unity and a wave of activism throughout Native American communities.

Defying the notion perpetuated by the media that the protest was superficial or inconsequential, *Radio Free Alcatraz* made a concerted effort to emphasize the work occurring on the Island. Certainly, the largest project related to the occupation was the establishment of a school. This project was led in part by the aforementioned Douglas Remington.⁷³ He and the others working on this project were seeking to accredit their institute as a private school.⁷⁴ At the time that Remington appeared on *Radio Free Alcatraz*, there was an unofficial agreement with the officials in San Francisco that their school would be regarded as an acceptable educational institute.⁷⁵ This prevented students from being pursued by truant officers; however, as it was an unofficial agreement, it offered no permanent protection.⁷⁶ If students were to transfer schools, there was no guarantee that they would receive any credit for their time at the Island school.⁷⁷ It was because of this, the protesters were continuing to pursue accreditation.⁷⁸ Discussing such efforts reinforced the idea that the occupiers had long-term and well thought out goals. Moreover, the focus on establishing a school on Alcatraz supported the notion that the protest served to bring about a better future for Native Americans. Education would serve as a catalyst for future activism, tolerance, and cultural celebration.

The school established on the Island sought to provide children with a unique educational opportunity and experience. In this school, there were two types of education. Children were taught typical academic subjects, such as math and English, but they were also provided with a

cultural education.⁷⁹ This second educational component was comprised of leatherworking, woodworking, bead craft, and other similar crafting endeavors as well as indigenous histories and cultures.⁸⁰ By including such skills and information in the school's curriculum, the protesters sought to imbue children with a better understanding and appreciation of their heritages.

Moreover, the school was unique as they planned to provide one teacher to each student.⁸¹ In this way, children would be able to flourish in their own unique manner; both children who were behind and children who were advanced would receive instruction specific for their intellectual advancement.⁸² When asked about how the students were performing, Linda Aranaydo, one of the educators and founders of the schools stated, "They wouldn't leave today... They were there till about four o'clock... and I won't go until the kids are ready to go, but they started to get hungry, so they left."⁸³ This establishes the school as a conduit for passion and intrigue. The children at the school were consumed with a desire for knowledge, and they willingly stayed to pursue it for as long as they could.

Additionally, the school served as a platform to create a more inclusive and inviting future for Native Americans. The founders of the school had the eventual goal of taking the children to other area schools to discuss what they were learning.⁸⁴ Linda Aranaydo emphasized the power "a fifth grader talking to a fifth grader about being Indian" would have.⁸⁵ Such communication and outreach would serve to create bonds and understanding between members of different cultural groups at a young age. In this way, gradually more inclusive and tolerant attitudes towards Native Americans could have developed and spread.

1.4.3 Challenges Facing Occupiers

In the face of great technical and logistical difficulties, *Radio Free Alcatraz* transmitted information about protesters, their work, and their aspirations. In one broadcast, after Sainte-

Marie's song concluded, a representative of the Pacifica Network came back on the air as their station was unable to establish a connection with the Island. He states, "Well, we are still trying to reestablish our contact with our transmitter on Alcatraz. This is not the first time we have had some difficulty... I think we've got them now, so let's go to Alcatraz."⁸⁶ This demonstrates the scope of the hardships faced by the protesters. Not only did they have to endure the quotidian strife of living in an isolated environment with limited and unpredictable electricity, but they also had to communicate with the outside world under these conditions. The protesters' efforts and dedication related to the transmission of *Radio Free Alcatraz* demonstrates their tenacity and the significance they felt their cause held.

Though transmitting was often difficult and broadcasting was imperfect, *Radio Free Alcatraz* and the protesters persevered and continued to spread their message. When beginning his interview with Jonny BearCub, John Trudell explains, "Tonight there's a little background noise here. We had a problem, and we're running our generator inside the studio. And also, we've been having quite a bit of hassle with our electricity... that's why we weren't on Friday."⁸⁷ Trudell goes on to explain that that Friday, there was no power on the Island, and then on Saturday, no supplies boats were able to reach the Island due to inclement weather.⁸⁸ As Trudell and BearCub continue their discussion, they ask each other to repeat themselves, and they yell to be heard over the loud hum and rattle of the generator.⁸⁹ Such sound quality issues were so common and severe that in researching and analyzing the recordings, one must spend significant time to ensure the proper spelling of multiple of the program's guests' names. In choosing to continue both the broadcast series and the occupation in the face of great difficulties, the protesters asserted that the changes they hoped to bring about to ameliorate the future were more important than their present comfort.

In the same broadcast, Trudell concludes by saying, “My watch stopped at eighteen minutes after the hour, so I’m not sure what time it is. So, this is kinda leaving me hanging up here ‘cause I have turn this over at 7:30. And what I’m doing is screaming for help here.”⁹⁰ He then thanks Jonny BearCub and concludes the broadcast early for fear he may run over his airtime.⁹¹ Trudell's language demonstrates an acknowledgment of the difficulties facing him and the other protesters, but it conveys such issues as minimal. In using colloquial diction and speaking in an even and paced voiced, Trudell subtly enforces the idea that technical and other difficulties are only minor inconveniences to the occupiers. This reinforces the import of the protest; the occupiers chose to endure the poor conditions of the Island so that their message could be heard and advanced.

1.4.4 Closing out the Broadcasts

Concluding the broadcasts, John Trudell reemphasized the protesters’ desire for education, tolerance, and harmony by asking for listeners to write in with any questions they may have. Trudell on one instance stated, “if you have any questions we haven't touched upon, and I know that there are many, just write a letter to myself... And we'll try to get all these questions answered.”⁹² By ending on this request, Trudell and *Radio Free Alcatraz* are able to create a dialogue with the audience. While protesters were vying for influence and attention on a national level, the broadcast chose to conclude with an invitation for individual interaction. This tactic makes the occupiers appear in relatively the same capacity as civil servants. By soliciting questions from the audience, protesters are conveyed as available to the public, and the broadcast appears to be subject to the concerns of the listeners. Though the occupiers and radio program had an agenda, their desire was to aid and serve their community.

1.5 Conclusion

The strong dichotomy between the two portrayals of the occupation of Alcatraz suggests a disconnect between reality and its interpretation. What the media saw as a “threat to white society,” protesters promoted as cause “for the good of all Indian people, which is the good of all people.”^{93 94} The viewpoints of the media and the protesters are incompatibly polarized depictions of the situation. Though it would be simple to discount one side of this story, much can be gained from comparing the two. A comparative analysis of selected releases and statements from both groups illustrates the extent of the divide between them. What the media presented as a selfish, violent, disorganized protest, occupiers presented as a selfless attempt to promote the cultures, rights, and future of Native Americans. Though the protest and protesters were imperfect, the media chose to grossly misrepresented, aggrandized and invented flaws in their accounts of the event.

Radio Free Alcatraz existed to transmit information from the occupation to the public in hopes of gaining popular support and aid. John Trudell, his guests, and the protesters at large made a constant and concerted effort to illuminate the sincerity, seriousness, and selflessness of the protest. In portraying the event in such a light, they sought to overcome the prevailing view that the protest was insubstantial. As John Trudell stated, “a lot of people when this first happened... were under the impression that it had a romantic meaning... ‘How neat the Indians going out camping on the Island’... but what many of them failed to realize” was that the protesters had serious ambitions and plans for the future.⁹⁵

Though the occupation of Alcatraz remains a relatively obscure event to the general public, it has had an immense effect on Native American communities, activism, and legislation. In the twenty years preceding the occupation, there were thirteen Native American land seizure

protests within the United States. In the thirty years following the beginning of the occupation, there were eighty-four such protests.⁹⁶ This dramatic increase demonstrates the influence the protest had on the Red Power movement. Alcatraz served as an inspiration to those longing for change. The occupation also led to a change in governmental policy. Prior to the nineteen-month protest, the federal government was predominately enacting termination policies. In response to the occupation and the heightened publicity on Native American affairs, the Nixon and Ford administrations supported tribal self-determination.⁹⁷ This policy stance reversal favored tribal autonomy. This protest demonstrated the power and influence individuals can have when they band together and demand change.

Ultimately, the occupation of Alcatraz Island can be viewed as a reminder of how far the Red Power movement has advanced their cause and how far there is yet to go. Though the occupation resulted in increased activism and policy changes, there is still a large economic disparity between Native American communities and the general population. As of 2016, one-third of the Native American reservation population was below the poverty line, and Native American unemployment was double the national average.⁹⁸ With continuing economic turmoil, the remaining issue of media misrepresentation, and a number of other issues facing Native American communities, action is still necessary. In an increasingly multicultural society, it is important to understand the history and struggles of different ethnic and social groups. Social cohesion is dependent on mutual understanding and perpetual progress.

Endnotes

- ¹ Guedel and Colbert, "Capital, Inequality, And Self-Determination," 4.
- ³ Daly, "Fractured Relations at Home," 429.
- ⁴ Daly, 429.
- ⁵ Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience" 85.
- ⁶ Burt, 85.
- ⁷ Kelly, "Détournement, Decolonization, and the American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969–1971)," 168.
- ⁸ Kelly, 185.
- ⁹ Kelly, 181.
- ¹⁰ Milner, "By Right of Discovery" 74.
- ¹¹ Kotlowski, "Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, and Beyond" 201.
- ¹² Kotlowski, 201.
- ¹³ Burt, 86.
- ¹⁴ Kotlowski, 202.
- ¹⁵ Daly, 427.
- ¹⁶ Daly, 429.
- ¹⁷ Daly, 429.
- ¹⁸ Burt, 89.
- ¹⁹ Burt, 89.
- ²⁰ Burt, 89.
- ²¹ Burt, 89.
- ²² Burt, 89.
- ²³ Burt, 85.
- ²⁴ Burt 85.
- ²⁵ Wollan, "Antigovernment Graffiti Restored, Courtesy of Government."
- ²⁶ Wollan.
- ²⁷ Milner, 78.
- ²⁸ Milner, 74-80.
- ²⁹ Butler, "Guardians of the Indian Image," 7.
- ³⁰ Butler, 35.
- ³¹ Lee, "Indians Still Occupy Island."
- ³² Lee, "Indians Still Occupy Island."
- ³³ KCRA TV. "VAM 068 - Occupation of Alcatraz - Bonanza Interviews."
- ³⁴ KCRA TV.
- ³⁵ Lee, "Indians Still Occupy Island."
- ³⁶ Lee, "Indians Still Occupy Island."
- ³⁷ Lee, "Indians Still Occupy Island."
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- ⁴⁷ Brown, "The Spirit of Radio" 90.
- ⁴⁸ Brown, 90.
- ⁴⁹ "Radio Free Alcatraz."
- ⁵⁰ "Radio Free Alcatraz."
- ⁵¹ Milner, 74.
- ⁵² "Radio Free Alcatraz 1969-12-28 and 1969-12-29; Radio Free Alcatraz."
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- ⁵⁵ Sainte-Marie.
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