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Native Americans During the Civil Rights Era

"We, the Indian People, must be governed by principles in a democratic manner with a right to choose our way of life. Since our Indian Culture is threatened by presumption of being absorbed by the American society, we believe we have the responsibility of preserving our precious heritage...We believe in the inherent right of all people to retain spiritual and cultural values, and that the free exercise of these values is necessary to the normal development of any people...We believe that the history and development of America show that the Indian has been subjected to duress, undue influence, unwarranted pressures, and policies which have produced uncertainty, frustration, and despair...What we ask of America is not charity, not paternalism, even when benevolent. We ask only that the nature of our situation be recognized and made the basis of policy and action."

- American Indian Chicago Conference, University of Chicago,
June 13-20, 1961, 5-6.

The Civil Rights era was a tremendous progressive period for America. Arguably one of the most progressive eras in our history in terms of a push towards equality for all. African Americans were at the forefront during the civil rights movement as they pushed for freedom, equality, and their constitutional rights. However, during this time period numerous other groups such as Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans used this period to shape their identity and representation. Ever since European settlers landed in North America the Indigenous population has strived for equality. Numerous times throughout this history Native Americans have made large advancements in the way they are perceived by non-natives. Events like the Alcatraz Protest and the American Indian Movement during the 1960s and 70s helped shape

where they are today. When talking about Native Americans it is important to note that they are a very non-homogenous group made up of many individual nations and tribes. Ultimately all of these smaller nations worked together during the Civil Rights Movement with hopes of progress and dreams of equality.

America was in a complete frenzy during the early 1960s. Jim Ollhoff, author of *The Civil Rights Movement*, said “Before the civil rights movement, injustices and inequalities were tolerated in the United States.” For Native Americans, a major part of the issue was the violated treaties guaranteed to them by the United States government. “Between 1962 and 1972 Native American nations were forced to spend \$40 million fighting against treaty violations in court.” (Rosier). As tension grew between Indian Nations and the United States, protests, marches, and other civil movements started to take root. One of the first major civil movements by Native Americans was the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968. Author Laurence French, discusses the significance of the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 as an act that guaranteed Native Americans their rights given to them by the United States constitution, while at the same time keeping their tribal sovereignty intact. It was a goal during this period to be looked at as equal citizens in the United States. The Civil Rights era had widespread effects on Native and non-native populations of all ages. During the 1960s we see the involvement of Native American communities as a way to use the Civil Rights Movement to their advantage. The National Indian Youth Council organization was formed in 1963 as a way to gather young people and protest for their rights. The involvement of many Natives during this time shows the camaraderie and determination to represent their tribes, communities and all Native people as equals.

During the 1960s and 70s there were two major events that helped continue the progress towards equality, the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the occupation of Alcatraz. Both took place during the Civil Rights era, and both were entirely Native efforts. It all started back in the 1950s when the government was looking to break up tribal communities and reservations so that more land would be available. The government believed that assimilation would benefit Native Americans by breaking up reservations, tribal structures, and beliefs in an effort to move them into a more modern society, equal to all Americans. However Native Americans had past beliefs that they would not simply disregard for a more modern life. The Civil Rights era was a way for Native Americans to take a stand and show that they are not going to bow down to the wishes of the United States government. Author Troy Johnson helps us relive the events surrounding the occupation of Alcatraz, an organized event aimed at establishing the expected rights of Natives. On November 20, 1969, 69 Native Americans set sail across the San Francisco bay in hopes of protesting by “conquering” the island and claiming it as theirs. Their validation was “rights to discovery” and called for a Native university and Native American museum on the land. Author Paul Smith recounts the events that unfolded once the island was occupied. Allen Cottier, a descendant of Crazy Horse and member of the occupation of Alcatraz read a statement that he would offer 47 cents per acre of land on Alcatraz, the same amount California was offering Indian tribes for their land. They used this as a publicity stunt during a Civil Rights period when many people were looking to rediscover and make progress in creating equality for their community. Positive media events followed the day after occupiers landed on Alcatraz. Smith explains that the The San Francisco Examiner and Oakland Tribune published about the event focusing on treaty rights and the fact that California insulted Natives by offering them 47

cents. This media event helps show that the representation of Native Americans during this time was improving and numerous media outlets were representing Natives in a positive light. Troy Johnson said it best, “In a new era in American Indian activism that continued well into the 1970s and kept national attention focused on Indian rights and grievances.” (Johnson). This protest electrified Native Americans and was forever stamped as a proactive step in Native American history.

The American Indian Movement started in Minneapolis during the latter part of the 1960s after the occupation of Alcatraz Island created a new awakening amongst Native Americans. According to Roger Chapman, author of *Culture Wars*, the movement was started by “Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, Eddie Benron-Banai, and George Mitchell; and later, Russel Means emerged as the group's spokesman.” These activists led two large surges post-Alcatraz including the Trail of Broken Treaties and a march in Washington D.C. that exploited the abundance of media coverage intended for the presidential campaigns. The Occupation of Wounded Knee was a protest that aimed to “show their disapproval of the Sioux tribal government.” (Chapman). After a 27 day period at Wounded Knee the American Indian Movement had lost two of its key leaders to battle. Members of AIM used this as more evidence of a “corrupt and oppressive government.” (Chapman). As many key figures of the American Indian Movement faced legal issues or death, the activism started to decline until a resurgence in 1978 and the “Longest Walk.” A march starting in San Francisco and ending Washington D.C. that aimed to “highlight its continuing grievances.” (Chapman).

We see an ongoing theme of cultural integrity throughout the 1960s by the actions of Native Americans. Native Americans of this generation were forced into assimilation for a large

portion of their lives. They exploited the civil rights era as a time to re-introduce and establish their culture within the United States. Donna Langston introduces us to the role of women during this time period. For the 19 months Native Americans occupied Alcatraz women were spearheading the charge, “running the community kitchen, school, and health center” (Langston). In 1964 we also see women at the center of large protests around Natives keeping their rights to fish, rights which the United States was trying to abolish. During these fish-ins it was mostly women carrying the arms, and they were not afraid to let the media know. A woman was quoted saying, "We are armed and prepared to defend our rights with our lives. If anyone lays a hand on that net, they are going to get shot. . . we're serious, there are no blanks in our guns" (Ziegelman). This shows that women were not afraid to fight for their rights, and stand up to others. During protests they were front and center, often times being the public citizens getting arrested. During one of the “first protests in 1961: of twenty-seven protesters, only eight were men” (Langston). If men happened to get arrested during protests, women were able to take the duties of the fishing boats without a problem. Fishing was essential to many Native American nations, that’s what makes it such a strong example. This time marked an era when women were protesting for their cultural rights almost as much as their womanly rights. We often times hear about the Noble Savage; men who were warriors, brave, brute and wise, but rarely do we hear about the ignoble savagery of women.

They say that hindsight is 20/20; the United States entering the 1960s was in a very dark place. Race wars, prejudices, and faulty social conditions were threatening to tear down everything this country had built. Without courageous activists like Martin Luther King Jr. the road may never had been paved for other activists, like those of the American Indian Movement

and occupiers of the Alcatraz Island, to make such progressive and great change for the United States. Looking back on this era, the progress Native Americans made may very well have saved their entire ethno-group. This time period re-energized and re-established Native Americans in society, and will forever go down as a major step to reach equality for all. Ultimately stopping the bleeding of assimilation that had been taking place ever since European settlers landed on this continent. Bullets were fired, blood was shed, lives were lost, but at the end of the day, the Native American community made major advancements towards their rightful place in society during the civil rights era.

Please visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcd3CYVmYHQ> to view our slide show on

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