

An Examination of the Causes of Wounded Knee 1973: a Case of Intra-tribal Conflict or Response to Federal Policies toward Indians?

Sonya Scott

Sonya Leigh Scott, who completed her BA in General Studies at Eastern Illinois University, is a graduate student in History and a member of Phi Alpha Theta. This paper was written for Dr. Lynne Curry's History 5360, 20th Century U.S. Social and Cultural History, in the fall of 2007.

On February 27, 1973 the small village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota was occupied by several hundred Oglala Sioux residents, tribal elders and headmen, medicine men, and members of the American Indian Movement headed by Oglala Sioux Russell Means after many failed attempts to impeach the chairman of the Tribal Council on Pine Ridge Reservation. The Independent Oglala Nation demanded the removal of Richard "Dick" Wilson as chairman and restoration of "tribal government as per the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 by traditional Lakota structures."¹ Traditional Lakota accused Wilson of mismanaging tribal funds, failure to hold meetings that concerned tribal affairs, nepotism, civil rights violations and for inflicting terror and violence against those who offended him or challenged his leadership.² Firebombs, shootings, beatings, property destruction, and violent deaths had become common on the reservation under the Wilson regime.³ Wilson also tended to favor "mixed bloods" over "full bloods" for council and government jobs and supported U.S. government and white interests over those of the people he represented, often overriding tribal council decisions.⁴

From this perspective, the occupation of Wounded Knee appears to be the outcome of intra-tribal conflict between council chairman Wilson and non-traditional, often "mixed blood" Indians and traditional, "full blood" Indians.⁵ This perspective also wraps both the event and the cause in a neat, small package; the occupation caused by two opposing forces on

¹ Wilson, Raymond. "Russell Means/Lakota." In *The New Warriors: Native American Leaders since 1900*. Edited by R. David Edmunds (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2001): 155.

² Ibid. 154; Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota Woman*. With Richard Erdoes. (New York, reprinted 1991): 115.

³ Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota Woman*, 115;

⁴ Weyler, Rex. *Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against the American Indian Movement*. (New York, 1982): 71.

⁵ The terms "mixed blood" and "full blood" refer to biological ancestry, as did the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 that required enrollment on reservations in order to receive land allotments impose terms. Although not historically how Indians determined clan membership or kinship, federally recognized tribes have relied on blood quantum to control access to resources provided to members. See R. David Edmund, *The New Warriors*, in his introduction page 4-5; Emma R. Gross, *Contemporary Federal Policy Toward American Indians*, Contributions in Ethnic Studies No.25, Leonard W. Doob, series editor (Westport, Connecticut, 1989), 19-20. I have also opted for the term "Indian" to describe the descendents of the first inhabitants on the North American continent as in reviewing the literature; native peoples to describe themselves most commonly use this.

the reservation in isolation from other problems Indians faced, and indeed in isolation from the historical roots that created the potential for such a situation. However, does this accurately portray the situation faced by the residents of Pine Ridge Reservation and its' origins?

Both scholars and participants in the Wounded Knee occupation have suggested that there was more than one event that occurred leading up to the occupation. Federal policies, including the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) and termination policies of the 1940s and 1950s created reservation conflict over and in competition for limited resources and services.⁶ Other events that occurred in close proximity to each other included the return of Russell Means, AIM leader to Pine Ridge Reservation, the murder of Oglala Raymond Yellow Thunder in Gordon, Nebraska, and the light sentences afforded the white perpetrators in Yellow Thunder's murder.⁷

A third perspective on the occupation provides insight into the causes of Wounded Knee; individual and collective ethnic renewal among Indians and other minority groups. A pan-Indian movement formed, organized and mobilized to address grievances against the U.S. government and other institutions. The climate of civil rights across the country inspired Indians to set aside tribal differences and produce a united effort.⁸ As awareness of ethnic renewal and expressions of grievances against federal policies and issues over treaty rights seeped into the reservation via the presence of Russell Means, strength and resolve to engage in a direct confrontation with Wilson, the BIA, and those in Wilson's camp was garnered. In addition, because the U.S. government had virtually ignored Pine Ridge Reservation residents' calls for help, the Independent Oglala Nation requested the assistance of AIM to stop the violence and abuses of Dick Wilson.⁹ Mary Crow Dog explained, "Wounded Knee was not the brain-child of wild, foaming-at-the-mouth militants, but of patient and totally unpolitical, traditional Sioux, mostly old Sioux ladies."¹⁰

Finally, the attempts of the U.S. government to suppress Indian resistance in order to gain access to tribal lands and their resources, as well as its obsession with Russell Means and AIM as revolutionaries and its

⁶ Cornell, Stephen. "Crisis and Response in Indian-White Relations: 1960-1984." *Social Problems*, 32(1), Thematic Issue on Minorities and Social Movements. (October, 1984): 45-46; Deloria, Vine Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*. (New York, 1974): 70; Crow Dog, Mary, *Lakota Woman*, 113.

⁷ Deloria, Vine Jr., *Trail*, 70; Reinhardt, Akim D., "Spontaneous Combustion: Prelude to Wounded Knee 1973." *South Dakota History* 29(3). (Fall, 1999): 230, 233.

⁸Deloria, *Trail*, 27; Nagel, Joane. "American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Politics and the Resurgence of Identity." *American Sociological Review* 60(6) (Dec., 1995): 948.

⁹ Sanchez, John, Mary E. Stuckey, and Richard Morris. "Rhetorical Exclusion: The Government's Case Against American Indian Activists, AIM, and Leonard Peltier." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 23(2) (1999): 31.

¹⁰ Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota Woman*, 113.

subsequent intensive surveillance of AIM's activities, lead to a strong presence of military and FBI operatives on and near the reservation.¹¹ This presence ultimately did not put down the protest; rather, it served to escalate the situation that was growing more desperate and hostile.

It is apparent, given what I have described above, that the situation at Wounded Knee on Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973 was much more than an example of conflict between factions on the reservation and that there was not a single cause responsible for the occupation. I suggest that Wounded Knee was realized by a convergence of factors that included reservation politics, federal policies, race and ethnicity as defined in both Indian and Euro-American terms, supra-tribal consciousness emerging in a civil rights climate, charges of injustice against Indians, and the numerous co-existing struggles- Richard Wilson and Russell Means, AIM/Russell Means and the federal government, and national interests (i.e. access to energy resources) and Indian interests. The occupation of Wounded Knee did not fit into the larger picture of the Indian experience, but expressed the broader conflict American Indians faced and that the federal government grappled with.

In this paper, I will examine and describe how the occupation of Wounded Knee cannot be accurately described as an intra-tribal conflict, but rather must be seen in terms of the consequences of federal policies toward Indians and in terms of ethnic and cultural renewal and identity among Indians. The rise of the Indian voice in the American Indian Movement and the refusal of Indians to accept Euro-American political structures and traditions that led to exploitation and abuse on the reservation rallied the Lakota to protest.

In connecting the many and diverse issues, I will answer the following questions: 1) What was the situation on Pine Ridge reservation that created factionalism and what was the role of tribal chairman Dick Wilson? 2) What role did federal policy toward Indians play in the conflict? 3) How did Russell Means and AIM fit into the conflict? 4) Why was the federal government so interested in the activities on Pine Ridge? 5) How did supra-tribal consciousness and ethnic and cultural identity figure in to the situation?

The Situation on Pine Ridge Reservation Demographics and Economic Disposition

Eleven-thousand Oglala inhabited Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1970s, covering approximately 4000 square miles, and was "a patchwork of

¹¹ Sanchez, et.al. *Rhetorical Exclusion*, 32; Roos, Philip D., Dowell H. Smith, Stephen Langley, and James McDonald. "The Impact of the American Indian Movement on Pine Ridge Reservation." *Phylon* 40(1) (1st Qtr., 1980): 91.

white and Indian-owned property."¹² Tribal government controlled one-half million acres, whites owned one million acres, and Indians owned one and one and one-half million acres with 83% of those lands leased out by the Indians because of poverty. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) controlled many of the land leases with these leases going to white ranchers.¹³ Oglala Indians that sold or leased their lands were forced to move to the agency town of Pine Ridge in order to try to find jobs. Typically, outlying rural residents maintained Indian traditions, but as they moved to the towns they became separated not only from their lands, but also from their traditional ways.¹⁴

The unemployment rate among Indians in the state of South Dakota was 20.1% as compared to the 3.2% rate among whites leaving 54.8% of Indians living below the poverty line. It is important to note that Indians at that time made up only 5-7% of the entire population.¹⁵ Because of high unemployment, one-third of the Indian population relied on government assistance and those who were employed often worked for the BIA or in tribal government posts.¹⁶ The scarcity of jobs also forced many off the reservation into government sponsored training programs, urban areas, military service, and to college campuses for further education. Other problems resulted from relocation and I will provide explanation in later sections.

Non-Indians and the churches owned and operated the majority of business and industries in Pine Ridge and Wounded Knee villages. The Gildersleeve's, in Wounded Knee, owned 40 acres and the Episcopal Church owned 80 acres and, as explained by lifelong residents, Eddie White Dress and Florine Hollow Horn, assumed complete control in the villages.¹⁷ The Gildersleeve's also owned a trading post and museum that catered primarily to tourists, making money for them and excluding the Indians whose heritage and history they put on display. Local residents also had to rely on the trading post and its high prices to purchase food and other necessities. Florine Hollow Horn offered that there was no place else to go and that "their prices were really high."¹⁸ Eddie White Dress elaborated on

¹² Roos, Philip D., Dowell H. Smith, Stephen Langley, and James McDonald. "The Impact of the American Indian Movement on the Pine Ridge Reservation." *Phylon* (1960-) 41 (1). (1st Qtr. 1980). Accessed online 08/27/2007. Database: JSTOR; Akwesasne Notes, "Voices From Wounded Knee 1973: In the Words of the Participants." *Akwesasne Notes* (Roosevelt town, New York, 1974): 9.

¹³ Akwesasne Notes, *Voices From WK*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*. (New York, 1974): 69.

¹⁵ Weyler, Rex. *Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against the American Indian Movement*. (New York, 1982): 67.

¹⁶ Akwesasne Notes. *Voices From WK*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 156.

the problem with the trading post, "They [Indians] won't be able to trade there or have no credit unless they sign their whole check [welfare] to him," referring to another owner of the trading post named Czywzycynski.¹⁹ Karen White Butterfly explained that employees of the local moccasin factory were forced to do piecework in order to make more than the \$1.60 per hour wage.²⁰ Indians were dependent not only on the government to manage land leases, but on whites who controlled the limited access to goods and services.

With the 1960s "War on Poverty" during the Johnson administration, more funding and patronage jobs had become available to raise the economic status of reservation Indians. These jobs and the disposition of funds were under the control of the tribal chairman who assigned jobs and committee posts. According to Deloria, "Most tribal politicians tried to support the people of the back-country communities, the traditional Sioux, but almost always had to bow to the voting power of Pine Ridge village and promise extensive patronage jobs to important village people."²¹ With the decreasing power of the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a result of the Nixon administration's position on Indian self-determination that grew out of Indian advocates' influence, there was increased power on the part of the tribal president, making this position more strongly contested.²² Although this had promised to restore control to reservation Indians and the tribal governments, the decreasing oversight of programs, jobs, and funds by the BIA and increasing factionalism on Pine Ridge set the stage for a chairman of Wilson's ilk to wreak havoc on those who opposed him and his agenda.

Thus, the situation on Pine Ridge in the early 1970s was one of economic and cultural desperation for the largely rural, traditional Lakota, but was also true for "mixed bloods." Economic survival among the Lakota, regardless of blood degree, depended on the favors of the tribal chairman. Many Indians sold or leased their allotted land in order to maintain a subsistent existence. In many instances, the BIA managed the leases and lowered rates to favor whites. Dependence on a more powerful tribal council, as well as the less influential but decidedly present BIA served well to pit "full bloods" and "mixed bloods" against each other in the quest for survival.

The Problem with Richard "Dick" Wilson

Dick Wilson, with the backing of white ranchers and the largely "mixed blood" vote of Pine Ridge village residents, was elected tribal

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from WK*, 157.

²¹ Deloria, *Trail*, 70.

²² Gross, *Federal Policy*, 36; Roos, et al. *Impact of AIM*, 95.

chairman in 1972. He defeated incumbent Gerald One Feather, a traditional and "full blood" from the remote village of Oglala. This defeat reflected the polarization between the remote villages on the reservation and those who relied on government and tribal positions at Pine Ridge.²³ Russell Means suggested that Wilson had misrepresented himself by his appearance, sporting the long hair usually worn by traditional Indian men and those involved in groups such as AIM. Means believed that Wilson used the guise of being a friend to the traditional Lakota and made statements that indicated he was supportive of AIM's goals.²⁴

Wilson was able to fund his campaign by promises of housing and liquor contracts to two white men from Rapid City and received support from other whites on the reservation that either leased or owned land.²⁵ Ellen Moves Camp, interviewed in *Akwesasne Notes* stated, "He's just some kind of dictator that got in there. Our people must have been pretty hungry to elect him."²⁶ Wilson had promised to help the Indians in the remote communities and had brought food out into the districts. Moreover, his support of government access to lands made him a favorite among those who supported mining and oil contracts to improve the local economy. Unfortunately, Wilson also sought to improve his own financial interests as well as those of his friends to the exclusion of others.²⁷ Although support was strong for One Feather among the remote villages, Wilson was able to garner sufficient support from Pine Ridge village and the mixed bloods to win the election. Traditional Indians frequently refused to participate in Euro-American style democratic structures that they viewed as illegitimate, thus taking away support from One Feather.

After his election, Wilson remained firm in his support of government access to tribal lands by favoring handing over 133, 000 acres of reservation land to the National Park Service. He also favored "accepting Claims Commission money for the stolen Black Hills," against the wishes of traditional Lakota people who did not view that land for sale.²⁸ The land was used during World War II as a gunnery range with the promise that it would be returned to the reservation after the war. The government offered compensation to the Lakota in return for the land, which as already mentioned, was opposed by the people but accepted by Wilson. When Wilson accepted compensation, the U.S. Army moved onto the reservation, the Lakota decided to impeach Wilson.²⁹

²³ Deloria, *Trail*, 70.

²⁴ Means, Russell. *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means*. With Marvin J. Wolf. (New York, 1995): 196.

²⁵ Young Bear, Severt, *Voices From WK*, in *Akwesasne Notes*, 17; Weyler, *Blood*, 70.

²⁶ Moves Camp, Ellen, *Voices From WK*, in *Akwesasne Notes*, 14.

²⁷ Cornell, *Crisis*, 50.

²⁸ Weyler, *Blood*, 71.

²⁹ Ibid. 72.

Prior to the decision to impeach because of reservation land losses, Wilson had inflicted violence and terror throughout the reservation against all opposition. With federal money, Wilson established his own private army—the Guardians of the Oglala Nation—known as the GOON squad.³⁰ He also used this squad to protect BIA facilities allegedly to protect them from AIM. For this, he also received BIA funding.³¹ Wilson targeted his violence and terror towards Russell Means, who had returned to the reservation, members and supporters of AIM, and traditional Lakota.³² Later, during a hearing on the violence Wilson explained to South Dakota Senator James Abourezk, “We organized this force to handle the threat of people like Russell Means and other radicals.” Wilson suggested that this was necessary to protect BIA facilities from a “dance” planned by protesting Indians after the occupation of BIA offices in the Washington, D.C. protest, and stated that the money to form this “auxiliary police force” was provided by the BIA.³³

Wilson used his GOON squad to burn homes, threaten families, make arrests, and inflict physical abuse on those who opposed him or who supported AIM. Wilson succeeded in completely terrorizing those who were his targets. An Oglala woman interviewed in Akwesasne Notes stated, when questioned whether the Indians out in the districts wanted help from AIM, “Sure. They’re the silent majority. They’re scared. How would you like it if I beat you up every time you said something? Would you go around voicing what you want to say? And if nobody hears you would you be able to stand up and fight?”³⁴

In addition to violence, Wilson enacted numerous oppressive policies on the reservation. He “abolished freedom of speech and assembly on the reservation,” according to Mary Crow Dog.³⁵ He also “issued a ban on AIM members speaking publicly on the reservation, or, in the case of Banks and Means, entering the reservation at all.”³⁶ Wilson also suspended the tribal vice-president, in a unilateral move, for engaging in activities with AIM.³⁷ With the backing of his GOON squad, Wilson was able to override council decisions, make unilateral decisions, use government funding toward his own interests, and run the business of the reservation with totalitarian control.

³⁰ Reinhardt, *Spontaneous*, 231.

³¹ Ibid. 235-6.

³² Weyler, *Blood*, 71.

³³ From the film *Voices from Wounded Knee*, by Saul Landau, Institute for Policy Studios, Washington, D.C., 1974 in Weyler, *Blood of the Land*, 61.

³⁴ Akwesasne Notes, *Voices From WK*, 182.

³⁵ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 115.

³⁶ Weyler, *Blood*, 60.

³⁷ Reinhardt, *Spontaneous*, 236.

Wilson’s position as tribal chairman, his authoritarian control over the reservation, and his close relationship with the BIA and government agents also afforded him control over monies provided by the government for reservation programs as well as payments for leased lands on the reservation. Frequently, tribal government, under Wilson’s control, withheld lease payments from traditional Lakota, including Russell Means and his brother who had not received lease money since they had joined AIM.³⁸ Control over the leases was a “service offered by the BIA to help Indians lease their lands.”³⁹ This assistance with leasing was a disguise by the Department of the Interior to keep strong control over the use of tribal lands and ensured government access to lands for grazing and mining contracts. In this way, Wilson was able to influence where lease money ended up, which was frequently in his own pocket and in those of contractors and friends he favored.⁴⁰

The examples of the corruption of Dick Wilson’s tribal council and his influence over the BIA are endless. Wilson’s long history of conflict-of-interest abuses and “illegally converting tribal funds” as a council member prior to his election as chairman suggests that Wilson was in no way interested in using his position to provide benefit to the people of Pine Ridge Reservation.⁴¹ The government support that, according to Ellen Moves Camp, Wilson enjoyed was unprecedented on the reservation. She stated, “We all wonder why it is that the Government is backing him up so much, because none of our other Tribal Councilmen were ever backed up like this. Nothing like this has ever happened before, where we have guns all over the reservation, threatening people, hitting people, putting them in the hospital. You don’t have no protection at all on the reservation.”⁴²

Wilson’s history of corruption, his disdain for Russell Means and AIM, his close connections to non-Indians, their money and their interests, and his relationship with the federal government and support of government interests over those of his constituents add dimensions to the cause or causes of Wounded Knee that certainly suggest much more than an intra-tribal conflict. In fact, I would argue that the notion of an intra-tribal conflict played a minor role in the build up to the occupation of Wounded Knee. The desperate situation on Pine Ridge was about not only Wilson and a polarized reservation; it went much deeper than that.

Indian Actions to Remove Wilson and Restore Peace

Despite the violence and fear of terror on the reservations, traditional Indians reported civil rights violations, violence, and corruption

³⁸ Weyler, *Blood*, 71.

³⁹ Ibid. 70.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 115.

⁴² Moves Camp, *Voices From WK*, Akwesasne Notes, 14.

to Congress and the White House.⁴³ However, the government did not respond to the 150 complaints of civil rights violations that were filed. Instead, government attention remained on Russell Means and AIM with intensive surveillance by the FBI and the Justice Department.⁴⁴ Because of the apparent lack of interest on the part of the federal government concerning the situation on Pine Ridge Reservation, the Oglalas understood the need to organize and mobilize.

The traditional Oglalas who opposed Wilson and his regime formed the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization; this included “Fools Crow and other chiefs, elder women such as Ellen Moves Camp and Gladys Bissonnette, the Means brothers, and younger supporters such as Gladys’s nephew Pedro Bissonnette.”⁴⁵ In order to effectively mobilize, the Civil Rights Organization understood they would need help, and they asked AIM for that help. Ellen Moves Camp explained in *Akwesasne Notes*, “We decided we needed the AIM in here because our men were scared, they hung to the back.”⁴⁶

The Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization quickly moved to file impeachment proceedings against Wilson and planned this for February 14, 1973. Wilson was able to call in the FBI and U.S. Marshals accusing AIM and the Civil Rights Organization of planning a takeover of the BIA, much like what had occurred in Washington, D.C. They responded by setting up a command post on the reservation. Wilson postponed impeachment hearings because of poor weather and dangerous road conditions, although travel was not particularly limited and several hundred people showed up for the hearing.⁴⁷

Responding to the postponement and with the help of AIM, the Oglala Civil Rights Organization began actively protesting against Wilson. Led by women elders, a group of 300 Indians protested in front of the BIA building at Pine Ridge village and demanded that Wilson be removed as tribal chairman and Stanley Lyman as superintendent. Although Lyman, according to Ellen Moves Camp was willing to meet with them, Wilson refused and informed Lyman that, “he didn’t have to face nobody.”⁴⁸ U.S. Marshals arrived quickly on the scene to protect BIA property and Wilson, and it is suggested by the editors of *Akwesasne Notes*, that their presence was most likely an effort to wage “some kind of attack” against AIM.⁴⁹ Vine Deloria, Jr. suggested that U.S. Marshal and FBI presence on the reservation were a result of increasing tensions on Pine Ridge and that the

⁴³ Sanchez, et al., *Rhetorical Exclusion*, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Sanchez, et al. *Rhetorical Exclusion*, 31-33; Weyler, *Blood*, 73.

⁴⁵ Weyler, *Blood*, 70.

⁴⁶ Moves Camp, *Voices From WK*, in *Akwesasne Notes*, 31.

⁴⁷ *Akwesasne Notes*, *Voices From WK*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Akwesasne Notes*, *Voices From WK*, 23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

government was prepared to put down any efforts by AIM to engage in the dispute between Wilson and the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization.⁵⁰

The protest ended without incident and the tribal government rescheduled Wilson’s impeachment for February 22. However, patrols by the tribal police, FBI, U.S. marshals, BIA police, the state police, and Wilson’s GOONs intensified and special operations forces set up communication networks on the reservation. The FBI and local police evicted AIM members, who were meeting in a Rapid City motel, and blockaded other meetings sites.⁵¹

The situation at Pine Ridge had escalated and was now extremely volatile. The incredible show of force by federal and state government suggests that there was more interest in the activities of AIM than in the problem of tribal government corruption and abuses. I suggest that the government was very aware of Wilson’s actions despite their silence when the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization asked for help. This silence strongly implicates the governments’ preference in maintaining the status quo to protect their interests rather than to address the Indians’ complaints of civil rights violations. I also suggest that this preference directly relates to what led to the occupation of Wounded Knee.

The situation at Pine Ridge Reservation alone, however, does not complete the picture of causation in its entirety, although conditions on the reservation alone certainly would have provided sufficient motivation on the part of the protesters. At this point, I depart from Pine Ridge to address the question of how the consequences of federal policies toward Indians, the resurgence of ethnic and cultural identity, and the rise of American Indian Movement contributed to and were realized in the historical event known as Wounded Knee 1973.

Federal Policies and Their Consequences

Since the late 1800s, there have been many policies that have addressed how to manage indigenous peoples in order to affect some sort of peace between Indians and non-Indians, provide land and resources for Indians and at the same time serve the interests of a growing nation with its demands for infrastructure, energy, and agriculture. These policies are numerous and complex and a full examination of their impact would exceed the parameters of this paper. My research revealed, however, that the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA), and the termination policies of the 1940s to 1950s figure prominently in what led to the conditions on Pine Ridge Reservation. In this section, I will briefly describe these policies, and how they fit in to the story that led to the occupation of Wounded Knee.

⁵⁰ Deloria, Jr., *Trail*, 71-72.

⁵¹ Weyler, *Blood*, 73.

The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887

S. Lyman Tyler, in a Department of the Interior publication, explained that the Dawes Act was intended to “deal with individual Indians and Indian families, and to by-pass tribal leaders and to sometimes ignore tribal groupings.”⁵² According to the annual report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for 1888, the act was a way to promote Indian independence as individuals, to make Indians “men” and not “wards of the Government.” The act also was a step towards the dissolution of tribal organization and an end of the reservation system in order to “place the Indians on equal footing with other citizens of the country.”⁵³ According to Emma Gross, the act “was rationalized in the name of assimilating the Indian to mainstream cultural values of the time” and was designed to “sever the reservations into allotments that could be owned and disposed of by individuals and families,” thus, to “civilize” them.⁵⁴

The Dawes Act did several things. First, it divided communally held tribal lands into small allotments to be held by individual Indians to engage in farming and eliminate traditional communal ownership. The federal government held all allotments in trust for twenty-five years, after which the Indian allottee received title to the land.⁵⁵ Secondly, the Allotment Act allowed Indians to become American citizens and, under the 14th Amendment, citizens of the state in which they resided. To receive their allotment, federal agents were to “enroll” Indians as tribe members to provide a census and determine eligibility by listing “blood quantum.”⁵⁶ Thirdly, the Department of the Interior sold and leased tribal lands to non-Indians, developers, ranchers, or other interested parties if those lands were not allotted to Indians.

Frequently, Indians who did not engage in farming, or were unable to successfully use allotted lands, often became homeless and unable to make a living after they sold or leased their land allotments. The Department of the Interior purchased land not allotted and reduced reservation size.⁵⁷ Weyler suggests that it was not uncommon for the Department of the Interior to lease lands “without the consent or even the knowledge of the ‘owner’” and that lease payments, usually set quite low, were submitted to the BIA-supervised tribal government.⁵⁸ Indians leasing land relied on tribal government to disperse lease payments accordingly.

⁵² Tyler, S. Lyman, *A History of Indian Policy*, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. (Washington, D.C., 1973): 95.

⁵³ Tyler, *A History of Federal Policy*, 96.

⁵⁴ Gross, *Federal Policy*, 20.

⁵⁵ Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 96; Gross, *Federal Policy*, 20; Weyler, *Blood*, 64.

⁵⁶ Tyler, 96; Edmunds, *New Warriors*, 4.

⁵⁷ Gross, *Federal Policy*, 20; Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 97.

⁵⁸ Weyler, *Blood*, 71.

Ultimately, the Dawes Act changed the character of the reservation by breaking up communally held lands, by determining degrees of “Indianness” that had not existed before, by allowing non-Indians access to tribal lands, and by attempting to force assimilation of Indians through individual ownership and mandating American citizenship. The difficulties Indians faced because of the Dawes Act included increasing poverty, cultural erosion, “problems of fractionated heirship,” and loss of tribal lands.⁵⁹

The effects of the Dawes Act continued to be apparent on Pine Ridge Reservation into the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the factionalism that had developed between “full” and “mixed” bloods. As noted earlier, the poverty that existed on the reservation created intensified power struggles between the factions as each side struggled for economic survival. The non-Indian presence of white ranchers and contractors, as well as that of the federal government, created a rift between those Indians who relied on non-Indians for jobs and those who rejected assimilation and sought to maintain cultural identity, despite the material cost.

By the early 1900s, it was evident to those involved in Indian affairs—both governmental and non-governmental—that earlier policies had failed and that the goals of these policies were questionable. The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal prompted a reshaping of policy toward Indians to address issues of sovereignty and replaced “direct colonial administration to a system of indirect colonial rule.”⁶⁰

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and John Colliers’ Dream

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) was the outcome of years of work by John Collier, who was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933. He had worked for ten years as the executive secretary of the Indian Defense Association and had been highly critical of policies toward Indians. Colliers’ goal was to develop agriculture, native crafts, and reservation industries to allow Indian reservations to be self-sufficient, as grant money for wage-work during the depression was ending. Self-sufficiency on the part of Indians would also decrease competition for jobs off the reservation.⁶¹ Collier also wanted to engage Indians in the decision-making process and encourage them to manage their own business affairs. He supported tribal governments styled after traditional Euro-American structures.⁶²

⁵⁹ Gross, *Federal Policy*, 20.

⁶⁰ Reinhardt, Akim D. “A Crude Replacement: The Indian New Deal, Indirect Colonialism, and Pine Ridge Reservation.” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 6(1) 2005: paragraph 2.

⁶¹ Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 125, 133.

⁶² *Ibid.* 134.

Collier had a long history in reform work during the early 1900s, focused on improving living conditions among the urban immigrant poor and later, working in Washington, D.C. as a political advocate for issues concerning Indians. His primary goal with the IRA was to end assimilation and instead, encourage Indian culture and expression in education and return to goals that are more agrarian. He also sought to reverse allotment and return allotted lands to tribal ownership, communally held, as prior to allotment. Reservations were no longer be controlled by agents, but rather would elect their own councils with oversight by a superintendent and the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA). In addition, Collier wanted a separate court system that would address all problems affecting Indian tribes.⁶³

Colliers' plan was strongly contested by many in Congress, various missionary groups, and the first Congress of Indians. The first Congress of Indians eventually agreed to support the plan after Collier appealed to them. However, Congress eliminated many of the components of Colliers' plan accused him of being communist and anti-religion.⁶⁴ What was left of the original plan was the reversal of the allotment policy on a voluntary basis and the establishment of new, democratically elected tribal governments that, under the OIA, would be the only form the U.S. government recognized as legitimate. The superintendent would provide oversight, the tribal government would establish a constitution, and the reservation would become a tax-exempt corporation and be eligible for federal programs.⁶⁵ Indian sovereignty, under this adapted plan, was still limited and was at "the bottom of an administrative hierarchy."⁶⁶ Colliers' dream to restore Indian sovereignty and culture was, in effect, undermined by those who sought to maintain control over reservation lands and resources, who did not want to relinquish privately held lands, who continued to support assimilation and acculturation of Indians, or who opposed Indian control over Bureau of Indian Affairs local offices.⁶⁷ Vine Deloria, Jr. suggests that enactment of John Colliers' original plan would have most likely "achieved outstanding success."⁶⁸

I included John Colliers' dream for restoration of Indian self-determination, tribal lands, and cultural practices and identities to illustrate that there was the desire on the part of some in government positions to undo at least a small part of the damage inflicted by white colonization of Indians. Still, the dominance of white, Christian, Euro-American style authority overrode Colliers' attempt to end cultural genocide and improve

⁶³ Reinhardt, *Indian New Deal*, paragraphs 24-25; Deloria, *Trail*, 196.

⁶⁴ Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 136.

⁶⁵ Reinhardt, *Indian New Deal*, paragraph 29-30.

⁶⁶ Cornell, *Crisis*, 45.

⁶⁷ Deloria, *Trail*, 197-199.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 203.

the basic standards of living to indigenous people. Acceptance to the IRA on Pine Ridge Reservation resulted from the power of white dominance.

The New Deal and Pine Ridge Reservation

In an attempt to gain Indian approval and support for the IRA, John Collier addressed the first Indian congress in Rapid City, South Dakota on March 2, 1934. Representatives from the majority of the tribes of the Northern Plains tribes were present. There was significant argument among the Sioux who were concerned about loss of treaty rights with the IRA. According to Deloria, "One of the biggest disputes, and one that would eventually surface at Wounded Knee in 1973, was the objection by the Sioux full bloods that any governments organized under the act could be dominated by mixed bloods who had already sold their lands and simply hung around the agencies looking for a handout."⁶⁹

The concern of the Sioux full bloods over the potential for coming under the authority of mixed bloods came out of decades of intermarriage on Pine Ridge Reservation. White men often married Lakota women and were able to get reservation land that way. Lakota women, in turn, achieved at least a small degree of financial security. Although some relationships may have been sincere, it is unclear how driven these relationships were by purely economic factors. Full-blood Lakota tended to be wary of these arrangements and termed these whites "squaw men."⁷⁰

Traditional Indians continued to favor the 1868 Ft. Laramie treaty that Red Cloud had won and had established the treaty as "the ultimate arbiter in nation-to-nation negotiations" between the United States and the Lakota.⁷¹ Mixed bloods on the reservation tended to embrace American ways and were of Euro-American/indigenous ancestry.⁷² It is clear that factionalism was clearly established before the adoption of the IRA and that it persisted throughout the decades preceding Wounded Knee 1973.

Regardless of the disputes among the residents of the reservation, enactment was "dependent upon a referendum vote of the people on the reservation," and Deloria suggests that this was the "most devastating aspect" of the amendments to Colliers' original proposal.⁷³ The tribes had one year to complete the referendum vote and a majority of all eligible voters would have to reject the IRA. Those who did not vote would have their votes counted in favor of the act; therefore, abstention meant yes. Traditional Lakota opposed this rule as in Lakota culture abstention

⁶⁹ Deloria, *Trail*, 198.

⁷⁰ Reinhardt, *Indian New Deal*, paragraph 36, 38.

⁷¹ Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* 30th edition (New York, 2001): 145; Reinhardt, paragraph 34.

⁷² Reinhardt, paragraph 34.

⁷³ Deloria, *Trail*, 199.

equaled disapproval.⁷⁴ Many simply did not understand what exactly they were voting for or against and were suspicious of the one-year time limit.⁷⁵

The other difficulty with the referendum vote was that there was no accurate way to determine tribal membership. There were many Indians on the reservation without land allowed to vote, and, as Deloria suggests, meant they were no longer eligible to receive federal services, yet they could participate in accepting or rejecting the IRA.⁷⁶ With the short time period to prepare for the vote, and without an accurate membership role, anyone who opted to vote did which might have affected the outcome. It has been determined, however, that 44% of those eligible to vote abstained in protest and disapproval. Thus, out of the 4,074 known to be eligible, 2,000 did not participate.⁷⁷

In the end, despite overwhelming disapproval by traditional Lakota, and in some cases fear of what would happen if the IRA was rejected among others, those in favor of the IRA on Pine Ridge Reservation, primarily mixed bloods, won the referendum and the IRA was enacted. The IRA allowed for the election of tribal councils, these councils were considered the legitimate form of Indian government, and they would be the only government the United States would recognize and deal with. The councils would continue to be under the authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of the Interior. That the vote was won by majority vote rather than consensus that were customary in Lakota tradition would continue to provoke the traditional Oglala Lakota.

Although Wounded Knee 1973 was decades in the future, the enactment of the IRA of 1934 and the way in which it was enacted deepened the fissure between full bloods and mixed bloods on Pine Ridge Reservation. The desire of the United States government to pass the IRA by ignoring traditional Indian customs and not giving adequate time for Indians to prepare to vote, as well as the lack of understanding by the traditional Lakota that abstention from voting would have serious consequences illustrates this desire. In addition to this, the expectation that indigenous people who had been trampled upon for decades would somehow be accepting of the force and will of a dominant, colonizing body implicates the federal government. Had John Collier's original plan remained intact, it is possible that the second Wounded Knee might have been avoided. The IRA was not the last policy to create problems on the reservation, however.

⁷⁴ Deloria, 199; Reinhardt, *Indian New Deal*, paragraph 32

⁷⁵ Deloria, 199.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Reinhardt, *Indian New Deal*, paragraph 48.

Termination and Relocation in the 1940s-1950s

During World War II, nationalism and patriotism created a climate of conformity among Americans, and included in this was the desire in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its commissioner Dillon Myer to "bring Indians into mainstream society on a massive scale."⁷⁸ Congress, during the 1940s and 1950s sought to "dissolve the trust relationship between Indians and the federal government," and to "do away with tribal recognition, break up the reservation system, and dismantle the BIA."⁷⁹ Identified tribes, over time, were to work to assume full responsibility and to be involved in decision-making. The states had differing ideas on how much federal support they required financially, and how much supervision they desired. The overall effect desired, however, was transfer of functions from the BIA to Indian communities and to improve the standard of living among Indians to that of the rest of the United States.⁸⁰

After the war, in order to decrease reservation population and reliance on government resources, job training and relocation programs were created for reservation Indians and for those who had served in the military. By urbanization, Indians would become assimilated into mainstream America, and this would push an end to the reservation system and the "Indian problem."⁸¹ Congressional hearings in the 1950s based on federal studies suggested that many tribes were ready for termination. Lists for determining readiness continued to be produced and proceedings were begun to terminate selected tribes.⁸²

During this period, Indians left the reservations or never returned to them in order to take advantage of training programs, job placement, and educational opportunities. By 1954, however, considerable resistance to termination in Congress had erupted with concern that rapid termination would have serious consequences for Indians who were not positioned to succeed independently. Others suggested that Indians should be tax-paying citizens and assume full responsibility as American citizens. Still others viewed termination as abandonment and that this was in conflict with the values of the nation.⁸³

By the end of the 1950s, efforts to terminate the reservation system and force assimilation had slowed and efforts focused on improving the conditions on reservations. Termination transitioned into relocation, and in

⁷⁸ Moisa, Ray. "The BIA Relocation Program." In *Native American Voices: A Reader*, Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot eds. (New York, 1998): 155.

⁷⁹ Moisa, *BIA Relocation*, 155.

⁸⁰ Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 166-167.

⁸¹ Nagel, Joane. "American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Politics and the Resurgence of Identity." *American Sociological Review* 60(6) (December, 1995): 954.

⁸² Tyler, 172-3.

⁸³ Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*, 175-177.

the early 1960s from relocation to employment assistance.⁸⁴ Up to this point, as Stephen Cornell suggests, termination policy was “an almost wholly unilateral policy.”⁸⁵ Facing strong criticism by both Indians and non-Indians, by 1970 termination was abandoned and instead a bilateral approach of self-determination was adopted.⁸⁶

One of the negative effects of termination policy was that in order to survive, Indians were forced to make the decision whether or not to remain on the reservation and be subject to the control of local Indian superintendents and BIA offices. The only other decision was to leave the reservation and take advantage of federally funded relocation programs whose goal was assimilation and separation from cultural identity and heritage.⁸⁷ An unexpected result of termination, however, was the emergence of a supra-tribal consciousness that was created by the desire of urban youth to discover their Indian identity that they had been denied. Affiliations were formed between the displaced urban Indians and traditional reservation Indians as the urban Indians returned to the reservation to learn about their cultures and languages.⁸⁸

Federal Policies and Pine Ridge Reservation

The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, and the termination policies of the 1940s and 1950s all contributed to the factionalism that developed on the reservation as it pitted traditional full blood Lakota against those of mixed blood in the quest for survival, culturally, economically, and politically. Not only did the policies create divisiveness among Indians, they excluded Indians from the debates that surrounded these policies thus leaving Indians without a voice in their own futures. The poverty and degradation on Pine Ridge Reservation had not been alleviated by federal attempts to construct new tribal organizations, land allotments, and programs to assimilate Indians into mainstream society. Indeed, there was strong resistance to many of these attempts by traditional Lakota who did not recognize Euro-American structures or federal government authority.

Although I argue that these policies are strongly implicated in what lead up to the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, I do not suggest that the intent on the part of the federal government was to create such a situation. In many ways, the policies were designed with the hope that Indians would realize a better life and in some instances, they did. I do suggest, however, that many legislators sought access to the vast resources

⁸⁴ Ibid. 201.

⁸⁵ Cornell, *Crisis*, 45.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 46.

⁸⁷ Edmunds, R. David ed. *The New Warriors: Native American Leaders since 1900*. (Lincoln, 2001), 2.

⁸⁸ Cornell, 46; Deloria, *Trail*, 41.

on reservation land, desired an end to the special status of Indians and the expenses involved in funding programs, and simply wanted to end the reservation system by forcing assimilation of the Indians with the hope that the “Indian problem” would gradually fade away.

However, the problem of the disposition of Indians did not fade away, and in the climate of civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s, Indians separated from their lands and their cultures began to find their own voice because of forced assimilation and misguided policies that set up tribal organizations. The policies that allowed Dick Wilson such powerful control over Pine Ridge Reservation with the backing of the BIA and the federal government also served to mobilize traditional Indians and lead them to strike back against decades of failed attempts to usurp their lands, their way of life, and their cultural identity. This backlash came in the form of supra-tribal consciousness and the creation of the American Indian Movement that empowered and mobilized the weary Lakota of Pine Ridge who could no longer stand by in fear while Dick Wilson inflicted his terror upon them while the government stood idly by.

Cultural Identity, the American Indian Movement, and the Return of Russell Means

The Search for Cultural Identity

Indians who were displaced by the effects of the IRA and termination policies in the climate of the 1960s and 1970s found themselves searching for the Indian identity they had been denied. For some, this search found them returning to reservations to learn the traditions and languages of the tribes from traditional Indians who had maintained traditional ceremonies and practices.⁸⁹ Many of the displaced were of mixed ancestry and understood that “loss of a specific tribal or ethnic affiliation [were] results of conquest and white dominance.”⁹⁰ Jennifer Dyar suggests, “For centuries, Indians themselves have been excluded from defining Indianness, powerless to curtail or alter white conceptions.”⁹¹ It was in the climate of civil rights and ethnic renewal that Indians deprived of their heritage by relocation and forced assimilation sought to find their identity not only by returning to tribal elders to study, but also by the formation of an intertribal network and a pan-Indian culture.⁹²

Prior to white hegemony over determining Indian identification and affiliation, tribes were able to “absorb aliens” freely.⁹³ Members of tribes

⁸⁹ Deloria, *Trail*, 41.

⁹⁰ Forbes, Jack D. “Basic Concepts for Understanding Native History and Culture.” In *Native American Voices: A Reader* Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot, eds. (New York, 1998), 33

⁹¹ Dyar, Jennifer. “Fatal Attraction: The White Obsession with Indianness.” *Historian* 65(4) (Summer, 2003): 833.

⁹² Nagel, *Ethnic Renewal*, 955.

⁹³ Forbes, *Basic Concepts*, 29.

consisted of those who “spoke a common language or a set of mutually intelligible dialects and maintained a common set of customs.”⁹⁴ In colonial America, Indians often accepted non-Indians into their tribe who had learned the language and customs, and demonstrated loyalty to the tribe. A formal ceremony made adoption into the tribe official and from that point on, the adoptee was considered a member of the tribe.⁹⁵

Allotment and the IRA changed Indian designation of tribal members from tribal control to government control. Indian ethnicity was no longer determined by the tribe, but was regulated by the government using blood quantum as a means to ascertain eligibility for services and official membership by enrollment defined individuals as tribe members.⁹⁶ In this way, tribes no longer controlled membership and dissolved traditional ways membership was determined. This helped to set up factionalism on reservations and forced “the adoption of white ways” and the loss of Indian traditions.⁹⁷ Biology now determined who was a true Indian and created a racial basis for cultural identity that had not previously existed.⁹⁸

The pan-Indian movement grew out of the desire to reconstruct and rebuild institutions; in other words, as Joane Nagel asserts, “collective ethnic renewal.”⁹⁹ Young, urban, educated Indians who had become alienated from whites saw the need to come together, create a supratribal identity, and mobilize as a united front to challenge the injustices suffered by Indians of all tribes.¹⁰⁰ It was out of this movement that the American Indian Movement grew to become an indomitable force.

The Rise of the American Indian Movement

The American Indian Movement (AIM) formed in Minneapolis in 1968 as an urban activist group dedicated to the protection of Indians from police brutality and injustice. In a very short time, they grew to a national organization that served as advocates for a variety of Indian concerns.¹⁰¹ Two well-known actions that AIM was involved in was the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by the “Indians of All Tribes” and the 1972 “Trail of Broken Treaties” caravan to Washington, D.C. that protested federal government abrogation of treaty rights.¹⁰² Because AIM had occupied a BIA building in the Washington, D.C. protest, they were identified as a

⁹⁴ Spicer, Edward H. “The American Indians.” In *Native American Voices: A Reader*. Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot, eds. (New York, 1998), 15.

⁹⁵ Dyar, *White Obsession*, 823.

⁹⁶ Nagel, 950; Forbes, 39.

⁹⁷ Spicer, 14.

⁹⁸ Forbes, 30.

⁹⁹ Nagel, *Ethnic Renewal*, 948.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 955.

¹⁰¹ Reinhardt, *Spontaneous*, 231.

¹⁰² Sanchez, et al., *Rhetorical Exclusion*, 29.

violent and subversive organization and were thus under constant surveillance by the FBI and other government offices. They considered AIM “armed and dangerous.”¹⁰³

Russell Means, who would later become one of AIM’s leaders, was born on Pine Ridge Reservation to a mixed blood Oglala and a full blood Yankton. His family had left the reservation for California when he was a child and he received his education there.¹⁰⁴ Means had returned to South Dakota to participate in the sun dance in 1971 on Rosebud Reservation and to learn Lakota traditions. It was during his time here that he discovered the problems that his kin languished under and as he developed relationships with tribal elders, such as holy man Frank Fools Crow and his clan, he became more determined to help end the injustices his people faced.¹⁰⁵

Russell Means and Pine Ridge

After Means returned to the reservation, the family of Raymond Yellow Thunder, an Oglala who had been murdered in February, 1972 by whites in Gordon, Nebraska, requested AIM’s help to publicize the light sentences handed down to the perpetrators. They had gotten very little information from authorities and Yellow Thunder’s body had been returned in a sealed coffin. AIM began a series of protests that gained national interest, “forced Nebraska officials to address the treatment of Indians in the state, and raised political consciousness on Pine Ridge.”¹⁰⁶ Newly elected tribal president Dick Wilson, along with Gerald One Feather, the former president, stated that he supported the efforts of AIM in demanding justice for Yellow Thunder.¹⁰⁷

The next problem Means confronted in the spring of 1972 was at Wounded Knee where the white owners of the trading post were making money exploiting the mass grave of Big Foot and three hundred others from the 1890 massacre as a tourist attraction. Providing back up to local residents who were for the first time protesting, AIM was accused of some minor damage to property in the press, which created some hostility towards them on the reservation. It was during this period that Means and AIM began to uncover many of the problems the traditional Oglala faced on Pine Ridge at the hands of the “so-called tribal government.”¹⁰⁸

During a brief departure of Means and AIM members from the reservation, Dick Wilson took office and swore that AIM would not conduct further protest on the reservation. It was during this time that

¹⁰³ Ibid. 34, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, *Russell Means*, 147-8.

¹⁰⁵ Means, *White Men*, 186, 187.

¹⁰⁶ Reinhardt, *Spontaneous*, 230.

¹⁰⁷ Means, 196.

¹⁰⁸ Means, *White Men*, 202-3.

AIM was involved in the “Trail of Broken Treaties” and Wilson immediately banned any AIM activities on the reservation, including dances. Wilson’s hatred for Means derived from the possibility that Means would run against him in the next election.¹⁰⁹ Wilson’s alliance with both white and government interests on the reservation intensified his determination that Means and AIM would not stop him in his personal quest to control the activities on the reservation.

The occupation of the BIA building in Washington, D.C. during the “Trail of Broken Treaties” magnified government interest in AIM as a hostile organization, ignoring AIM’s primary concern over treaty rights and their desire to confront Indian concerns through negotiation.¹¹⁰ And as Russell Means and members of AIM returned to Pine Ridge Reservation, the FBI began to engage in ‘training’ exercises with the BIA police and paramilitary groups trained in counter-insurgency tactics arrived on Pine Ridge.¹¹¹

The ongoing violence toward traditional Lakota on Pine Ridge by Dick Wilson pushed the locals to ask for help from AIM. They asked that AIM “investigate their rights under the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868,” to help the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights group to “defend the civil rights of individual Oglalas against the excesses of the tribal police,” and to help end the unfair leasing policy that did not allow collective use of individual allotments.¹¹² Russell Means and Dennis Banks agreed to help, and the stage was set to impeach Dick Wilson. The stage was also set, unbeknownst to the participants, for the occupation of Wounded Knee.

At Wounded Knee

When the protest began on February 27, 1973 at Wounded Knee—Cankpe Opi in the language of the Lakota—those who prepared to participate understood that they were about to engage in a serious fight. This was a fight for their survival and they were no longer willing to bear the injustices in silence that was the traditional way of the Lakota.¹¹³ In order to avoid the garrison that had been created around Pine Ridge village, this historic site was chosen.¹¹⁴ The caravan of nearly 300 supporters, including Russell Means and members of AIM arrived and stood to face the years of injustice, the terror of Dick Wilson, and the possible wrath of the federal government with whom they had never quarreled, but had sought some sort of relief.

¹⁰⁹ Deloria, *Trail*, 71.

¹¹⁰ Sanchez, et al., *Rhetorical Exclusion*, 32.

¹¹¹ Weyler, *Blood*, 72.

¹¹² Deloria, *Trail*, 73.

¹¹³ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 124.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The occupation lasted seventy-one days as the occupiers held firm to their demands that called for senate investigation of the BIA and Department of the Interior, for the U.S. Foreign Relations Committee to convene to review treaties with Indians, and senate investigation of the conditions on Sioux reservations.¹¹⁵ Roadblocks were set up to stop supplies from getting into Wounded Knee and later, federal forces shut off electricity and telephone service.¹¹⁶ As news of the occupation spread, nationwide protests began in support of the occupiers. Although misrepresented in the media as militant occupiers with little attention on the actual causes, new occupiers arrived on the scene and supplies from the outside entered Wounded Knee.¹¹⁷

The occupation ended May 9, with two Indians dead, numerous casualties on both sides, with Dick Wilson remaining in office, and many of the members of AIM in years of litigation, in exile, or in prison.¹¹⁸ Despite minimal change in the condition on the reservation, John Mohawk states, “it did much to educate many young Indian people, and it did form at least the appearance of a leadership potential among the Indian people.”¹¹⁹

Connecting The Causes Of Wounded Knee 1973

Conclusion

In examining the numerous events preceding Wounded Knee, I find no single cause that lead to the occupation; rather I see a series of decisions, situations, conflicts, and events that converged in one moment. The situation on Pine Ridge Reservation was one of quiet desperation among traditional Lakota, of factionalism that developed over time as a result of federal policies toward Indians that separated them according to blood degrees, and of terror and violence at the hands of Dick Wilson supported by white interests and federal funds. The situation was further complicated by the presence of the American Indian Movement, with whom the federal government sought to silence, and the presence of Russell Means, with whom Dick Wilson was determined to rid himself of to maintain control of the reservation.

The consequences of federal policy toward Indians lead to the emergence of a supra-tribal consciousness and the ethnic renewal among Indians living off reservations. Seeking to end white dominance and restore self-determination, the pan-Indian movement was born to address treaty rights, Indian sovereignty, and to confront injustices toward Indians. With the renewal of cultural identity, traditional Lakota garnered the resolve to

¹¹⁵ Wilson, *New Warriors*, R. David Edmunds ed., 155.

¹¹⁶ Edmunds, *New Warriors*, 56.

¹¹⁷ Edmunds, 56; Mohawk, John, “Directions in People’s Movements,” in *Native American Voices: A Reader*, Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot, eds. (New York, 1998): 163.

¹¹⁸ Josephy, et al. *Red Power*, 49.

¹¹⁹ Mohawk, *Directions*, 163.

address concerns on the reservation and found support to have their voices heard.

I would argue that the Oglala did not seek to dissolve their relationship with the federal government, rather to restore it in ways that were just and fair. Their primary concern was to end Dick Wilson's violence towards them and to insist that the federal government honor treaty rights. What erupted into violence reflected more on the response of the federal government in their desire to end the activities of AIM, and their lack of response when the Oglala asked for help rather than the actions of the occupiers themselves.

Regardless of the intention behind federal policy toward Indians, the result of allotment, the IRA, and termination changed the character of the reservation with the influx of whites, the elimination of traditional tribal organization, and the efforts to end the reservation system by relocation and forced assimilation. These policies ended up reflecting the governments' desire to have unlimited access to natural resources on reservation land, cultural genocide in the form of assimilation and acculturation, and to solve the "Indian problem" once and for all by eliminating communally held lands among Indian peoples. This is not to say that there were not voices of dissent in the government as is evident in the end of termination. Nevertheless, these dissenting voices were not, in the end, strong enough to counter those who dominated.

The story of Wounded Knee 1973 encompasses decades of struggle and conflict between white occupiers and indigenous people. It is a rather sad story on both sides, as those involved in the occupation, and indeed those involved in decisions up to that point, found themselves faced with conflict that has no end, no truly acceptable resolution. Again and again, we are confronted with history, a history that perhaps none of us chose, but one that we must live with and find some sort of peace inside of. I understand that Wounded Knee was one of these attempts to somehow soothe the deep scars that remain from a time long ago, when no one could have anticipated what was to come.