

John Trudell as the 'Voice' of Native Peoples - 'Who Fights an Uncivil War with the American Oppressors'

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Univ. of Oklahoma Student Publications

25 November 2013

In 1983, John Trudell wrote "tears of anger, tears of sorrow, following giving birth to resistance." [1] John Trudell is that resistance; he is a Native born to survive and to be free no matter what. John Trudell was and remains a leader of the Red Power Movement. He is considered extremely dangerous by the FBI, which assembled a dossier that is 17,000 pages in length, one of the largest in FBI history. [2] Trudell fights for the Natives who are plagued by mass poverty, Natives who were removed from their sacred lands, and who starve for respect from American Oppressors. Through Native occupations, gun fights, and government conspiracy, Trudell stands tall and with his voice he leads the Native rebellion. From the [occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969](#) to the present day, Trudell has been a vital member in the Native civil rights. Despite all government efforts to silence them, Trudell emerged as the "voice" of the Red Power Movement which was the rallying cry for Natives civil rights.

Before Trudell ever stepped into the battle for Native rights, he suffered at the hands of American Oppressors. Born in 1946, Trudell grew up in a world that was actively fighting for the genocide of Native culture. In 1950, Dillon S. Myer, the same person who operated the [Japanese internment camps](#), was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Myer pushed the Indian Relocation Act, which called for the Natives on tribal lands to abandon their cultures and join the booming American economy. The Native people were offered one bus ticket to several cities, job training and placement, and decent housing. Most Natives, however, only got the bus ticket and were left to struggle in ghettos. While this was going on, roughly 109 tribes were completely cut off from government help and 1,362,155 acres were taken from the Native people. [3] Due to the Relocation push, other acts of poor legislation, and lack of government support, Natives Reservations suffered conditions that would be comparable to that of a war torn nation. At this time there was an urge for Assimilation in the educational process. For many Natives, including Trudell, Assimilation became a way of life that was forced onto them. During this Process of cultural genocide, Trudell and other Native Children were forced to abandon their traditional

language, clothing, and other cultural elements to fit in with the White population. With a great desire to escape the situation, Trudell joined the US Navy when he was 17 years old. Once his service was over, he attended San Bernardino Valley College, where he got the educational tools in broadcasting to become “The Voice” of the Red Power Movement.

Trudell’s voice shook The Rock with his big time radio début – the Alcatraz Occupation in 1969. The occupation fell under the [Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868](#), which states that any government surplus land belongs to the Native Tribes. A band of Natives lead by Richard Oaks took control of the Island and invited other Natives to join in the occupation. John Trudell was one of the many people that answered the call to fight back and demand that the Government honor their treaties with Native Tribes. With the arrival of John Trudell and his unmatched talent to be a voice of the Native movement, “Radio Free Alcatraz” was born. “Radio Free Alcatraz” gave the occupation a voice and gave the nation a chance to hear what they were fighting for.

Through “[Radio Free Alcatraz](#)”, Trudell’s voice became a driving force for Natives to hold strong and unite. A crucial part of the occupation was to have the US Government build a cultural center and educational facility on the Island; the US Government took the educational center proposal as an unreasonable request. [Using the radio](#), Trudell was able to hold interviews with other Native people in an effort to display legitimacy on the educational claims. The Government looked for ways to delegitimize the Native Group at every available opportunity. Trudell was able to help squash any negative publicity that government or news agencies threw at the Natives. The General Services Administration’s (GSA) West Coast regional administrator, Tom Hannon, and other government officials lead the vicious negation arguments, saying things like: the Island was not suitable for habitation and it was unsafe to stay on the Island. They used this as a tactic to demoralize and remove the Natives from the Island. Trudell retorted through several broadcasts that the conditions on the Island were bad, but so were the conditions on the reservations. Trudell was able to use his eloquent phrasing and voice in collaboration with the efforts of the Native leaders on the Island to keep the Movement together.

As the weeks progressed, because of the government pursuit, among other events, Trudell and the other Native Leaders slipped into dark times and lost the Island. As another tactic to remove the Natives from the Island, the Government stopped running electric power, which caused the water pumps to stop working. As conditions got worse on the Island, splits amongst the different factions started to come out. To make matters worse, on June 2nd a large fire broke out, destroying two historical buildings and the lighthouse. Hannon blamed the Natives for the fire, and in a report from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Trudell was said to have had a direct link to the fire. The *San Francisco Chronicle* claimed that Trudell planned the fire in retaliation for the water supply being cut off. [Trudell reported](#) on “Radio Free Alcatraz” that there was a boat that

was seen speeding away from the Island by several Natives. Over time, Trudell was able combat these clams but it tarnished his image with the people. As the tensions between the various Natives rose over the next few months, the Government made several feeble attempts for negotiations. Regardless of the incident, Trudell was able to gather the Native people in further negotiations. In June 1971, U.S. Attorney James Browning[4] was said to have been in negotiations with Trudell and other Natives concerning the deed to the Island. During the time of the negotiations, a Special Forces team snuck onto the Island and forcefully removed all Natives from the Island. Although [June 11th 1971](#) marked the ended of the Alcatraz Occupation, it marked the beginning of the Red Power Movement, with Trudell as leading member.

Trudell met the American Indian Movement (AIM) during the Alcatraz occupation and united with them shortly after, becoming a leading member; through militant force, AIM pushed the Movement forward. Instead of carving a turkey, Trudell and other members of AIM expressed their thanklessness in the Plymouth Rock demonstration in 1970. The goal was to get the issue of Native poverty on the forefront of people's minds. This marked the 350th anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock and AIM leaders thought that this would make a big media splash. 300 Natives from nearly twenty tribes showed up.[5] After making several exuberant speeches, AIM proceeded to the beach where they buried the Rock in sand. Later in the night, Trudell and several other members took the Rock and painted it bright red. They did this to serve as a reminder to all who came to visit the rock that the Natives who once saved the pilgrims are now suffering at their hands. The protest ended up getting AIM some national attention and was able to give AIM a louder voice amongst the public.

Trudell, alongside AIM leaders Russell Means, Dennis Banks, and a handful of other AIM members, seized Mount Rushmore in July 1971. The Black Hills, where Mount Rushmore is located, is a sacred land for the Lakota. With the faces of Presidents that oppressed the Native people carved into the Mountain, the U.S. government not only defiled their sacred land but added insult to it as well. AIM Members wanted to make it known that injustices like that should not go unaccounted for. Trudell and other AIM leaders were looking to raise awareness of the debate as to whom the land actually belonged. Even though this Occupation took up several days, it only caught local news attention and forced AIM members to regroup.

AIM members, fed up with the lack of treaty recognition, looked to [storm the Capital](#) and force President Nixon to listen to them in what would be known as the [Trail of Broken Treaties](#). November 3, 1972 – a group of Native people led by Dennis Banks swarm The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which easily fell under AIM occupation. The following day, Trudell and other reinforcements came storming in to help hold the building. With police officers getting increasingly violent, the Native occupiers hunkered down and tried to fortify the Government

building. Many of the Bureau employees were still inside the building at the time of these violent actions. Trudell helped the trapped bureau members escape out of the building through a fire escape ladder. This helped cool some of the tension coming from the police, but not by much. Over the following days a twenty point document was released by the Natives in hopes that President Nixon would respond.

With [the document](#), Trudell and other AIM members attempted to give a voice to the treaties that had been forgotten as well right several other injustices. The main focus was to look at treaty reform and see what could be done so that the treaties made by the government would be honored, and penalties would come for violating them. AIM also sought to get more of a voice represented in the congressional sessions by having four handpicked Natives discuss the reform plan with Congress on live televisions so that there couldn't be a misunderstanding.[6] The document also outlined things such as the right for all Natives to be able to practice their religion as they pleased, land rights, and how the tribal government would work. Despite the document being well thought out and very clear, President Nixon rejected any notion of treaty reform. Discouraged, the Native people left the occupation and went back to their tribes on January 9th 1973.[7] As a direct result of the occupation, the FBI increased its counter intelligence movement against all AIM members.

AIM, with the combined efforts of the Oglala Lakota, looking for the government to honor the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, took over the town of Wounded Knee on February 27, 1973. Big corporations started staking claims to the entire sacred land, polluting and taking land away from the Lakota. During this time, AIM became labeled as one of the most dangerous groups in the nation, and, in a subcommittee headed by Senator James Eastland, they went as far as to label AIM a terrorist organization. The FBI treated the occupation like a time of war and had several highly armed vehicles and helicopters sweeping the area on a frequent basis. After 72 days of gun fire back and forth between the FBI and Native Members, the tribal elders ordered that the occupation come to an end.

Trudell found himself caught trying to decrease tensions after a massive shutout in Oglala. In June 1975, the two FBI agents in pursuit of AIM member Jimmy Eagle were lead to an Oglala Native camp. The FBI agents opened fire at the village in attempts to get Jimmy Eagle; the Natives returned fire and caught themselves in the middle of a bloodbath. The Native member Joe Stuntz was shot and killed as well as the two agents. In the days that fallowed, pressure from the government increased, and the non-Native members of the town became worried of retaliation from AIM. Trudell and a small group of other AIM members went to the towns and held a conversation with the local members, informing them that they didn't intend to harm anyone. As three members of AIM stood trial for the murder of the two government agents,

Trudell and two other AIM members took to the streets to help show the people of Cedar Rapids that they meant no harm. With the spread of what was really going on in the town, two of the three Natives were acquitted and got off with self defense charges. Although this was seen a victory for Trudell, it also marked a major downfall for AIM.

Tragedy hit home for Trudell after an FBI protest on February 11th 1979, which marked the end of Trudell's involvement with AIM. While participating in a protest in the nation's capital, Trudell decided burn the American Flag on the FBI headquarters as a symbol saying that the "American flag...has been desecrated. And...the only proper way to dispose of the American flag after desecration is to burn it... the American flag does not represent integrity, honor, justice, or truth"[8] Trudell was arrested for doing so; and while being detained, Trudell was warned that the way he was acting was liable to get someone in his family hurt. 12 hours later, a suspicious fire broke out at Trudell's house, trapping his wife and children inside the house and burning them alive. The BIA went out and conducted an insufficient open-close investigation that claimed it to be a freak accident. Trudell paid a private instigator to do a further investigation and found substantial evidence saying it was not an accident.

With the death of his family, Trudell left AIM and turned to poetry; this further strengthened the Red Power Movement. With nothing left to lose, Trudell spoke out using Native drums and songs intertwined with poetry. Trudell made his 1st record, "[Tribal Voice](#)", which gained much attention and support from a number of artists. Bob Dylan claimed that it was ground breaking and the album of the year. He was able to create an empowering movement within the Native people, and also brought attention to Native problems using [music](#) and [poetry](#).

During this time, he also spoke about the injustice that was happening with the [uranium mines](#). Large corporations, lead by the wealthy, were going onto or near Native lands and dumping massive amounts of uranium. This led to massive health problems in the communities, and with the majority of all American power coming from lands on or next to the reservations there was little being done to stop it. The Native people were subject to water conditions that had an average contamination that was 22 times higher than what the EPA considered to be toxic. Using his powerful voice and poetry, Trudell was able to bring international attention to the situation. Trudell was able to gather celebrities and other, larger forms of media to push for stopping the pollution, not just for Natives but for all people that suffer from these actions.

Trudell is still pushing the movement forward to this very day, and continues to fight because he has to. Despite government efforts to silence Trudell and the Red Power Movement, Trudell's powerful "voice" continues to thwart them all. Through sorrow and raw determination, Trudell was able to unite the Native peoples in a fight against their American Oppressor. Trudell is

considered extremely dangerous by the FBI, and rightfully so, because with his words he is able to rally those to stand up against injustice. John Trudell is the resistance.

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Endnotes

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8. *Trudell*. Dir. Heather Rae. Perf. John Trudell. Appaloosa Pictures, 2005. [DVD] (passage quoted is in: 38:35-39:15 mins.)