

9d – Wounded Knee, Part 2

On Feb. 27, 1973, a group called the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized control of Wounded Knee. Led by AIM leader Russell Means, the occupation began to protest the reservation's officially sanctioned government under the leadership of Dickie Wilson. Two people were killed during the 71-day occupation, 12 were wounded, including two marshals, and nearly 1,200 were arrested. Inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1960's, AIM put the issue of Native American rights into the national spotlight. The following is Russell Mean's account:

I failed to sleep much that first night, knowing what awaited us. As dawn approached, the radio began to report what was happening. We had taken white people hostage, and one had escaped (in reality, one of the local merchants had abandoned his wife and small children when he realized the Indians were coming to repossess their community, so he invented the hostage story to conceal his cowardice). The radio also reported - accurately - that the Feds were mobilizing, and would soon surround Wounded Knee.

Our breath could be seen in the freezing dawn light while I stood with Severt Young Bear and Edgar Bear Runner and said, "We probably won't get out of this alive." Edgar agreed and Severt added, "Just like our ancestors."

At that moment, I realized we would be forced to defend Wounded Knee to the death. Judging by their past actions, we were convinced the U.S. government would not negotiate our demands. As we stood there, lost in our emotions of the moment, I began to pray to die a good death for my children and my people.

Soon the FBI's agent in charge arrived at one of our roadblocks. Pedro Bissonette, Vern Long, president of the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, and I took our demands to him. As we walked back toward our forces at Wounded Knee, he yelled, "Who do you think you are?" You're in a fishbowl. Don't you understand? We can wipe you out!" With that hard line response began the most protracted and intense confrontation between American Indians and the United States government since the end of the Indian Wars in 1890.

For seventy-one days, through three blizzards and more than five million rounds of ammunition expended by the Feds, we experienced a freedom we had not known for a century and have not known since. This wasn't the pseudo-freedom of America that gets bandied about every Fourth of July or during political campaign sloganeering. This was the real, no-holds-barred freedom my ancestors had known before we were corralled into the U.S.-run concentration camps known as Indian reservations. ...

The siege lasted until May 8. Firefights and skirmishes abounded during that time. To make our limited firepower appear more impressive, we would take our one Kalashnikov Ak-47- with its distinctive and respected bark - and periodically run it from bunker to bunker, shooting off a quick burst at each spot. Then we would paint a length of stovepipe and allow the press to stumble across what appeared to be a rocket launcher or bazooka. ...

We emerged from the siege at Wounded Knee with two American Indian patriots dead by sniper fire - Frank Clearwater and Buddy Lamont, a Vietnam vet - and fifteen wounded. More than six hundred were arrested in Wounded Knee- or en route to the siege - and faced multiple federal charges. In the end, not one person, black, brown, red, yellow or white, was convicted on any of the original charges.

At Wounded Knee, just as our ancestors had done, we decided to end the siege by putting our faith and trust in the words and documents of the United States government. And once again, the promises given to end the siege were never honored. ...

We hoped America would remember the advice of legal scholar Felix Cohen, who said the American Indian is the miner's canary for the United States and the general condition of freedom and liberty for America as a whole could be measured by its treatment of Indians. That

reflection by Americans has not happened. Instead, American Indian policy has now become general American policy. Look around you.

Today, as I look across the landscape of the United States of America, the opposite of freedom prevails. Just as we had to battle for freedom for our lands, we had hoped farmers and ranchers would realize they were next on America's sacrificial chopping block. Over the past three decades, family farm after family farm and ranch after ranch has been auctioned off or sharecropped out to corporations. Self-sufficiency has been replaced by dependency on a malevolent federal government, and the peoples' love of the land has been replaced by personal desperation and self-interest.

Freedom of thought has been replaced by a state-run educational system that produces docile, self-absorbed automations that would make Orwell blush. War is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength. Instead of learning to be critical thinkers, America's youth are conditioned into an ethic of mass consumerism and corporate careerism.

Even during the siege at Wounded Knee, when I had left to meet with federal officials and then to speak at a few university campuses, I still remember the same complacency. I was making a speech at UCLA. The students were lounging about the green lawn, taking in the sun and talking among themselves, paying no attention to my words. I walked off without finishing.

During the siege at Wounded Knee the American Indians of North America began feeling a resurgence of dignity and pride - an immeasurable benefit that continues to this very day. Not only in North America but throughout Central and South America as well, the tiny spark of ancestral pride grew into a flame that has now spread through the entire hemisphere. American Indian people - from virtually every Indian nation in the Americas - now are demanding that the only color of people in the human race currently not allowed to sit at the table of the family of nations be recognized and respected.

American Indian peoples are walking down the corridors of the international community and have brought the rest of our indigenous families from all around our sacred Grandmother, the Earth, to join in the struggle for human dignity and peace on Earth. It's sad that the United Nations recognizes legitimate Indian organizations while the United States will not listen to any Indian voices but its puppet tribal governments.

I continue to struggle for freedom, and my people continue to revolve back toward the realities of our ancestors. But what of America? If the Indians at Wounded Knee represented Cohen's canary, then the federal-government attack on the Waco compound in 1993 proves the canary has died. One does not have to embrace the ideologies of the Branch Davidians or those of the Freemen to realize the willingness of the U.S. government to kill its own dissenting citizens, and to see a society operating without a moral compass.

Our aim at Wounded Knee was to force the U.S. government to live up to its own laws. From that, one can draw the real lesson of our stand there: It is the duty of every responsible American to ensure that their government upholds the spirit and the laws of the United States Constitution.

After all, what freedom really means is that you are free to be responsible.

This article is reprinted from "Rolling Stones the '70s," published by Little, Brown and Company, Copyright 1998 by Rolling Stone Press.