

9a – The “Discovery” of Alcatraz

The 1960s and 70s ushered in a new wave of American Indian activism. Riding this wave, a group of Indian college students in California and urban Indians in the San Francisco Bay area took over Alcatraz Island for 19 months, symbolically claiming it for Native peoples. Their goal was to draw attention to a long history of government abuses, including land seizures, broken treaties and cultural genocide. In a pointed jab at four centuries of racist U.S. Indian policies, the protesters issued the following sarcasm-laced proclamation "to the Great White Father and All His People. "

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery.

We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of the land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four (24) dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. ...

We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of the land for their own to be held in trust by the American Indian Affairs and by the bureau of Caucasian Affairs to hold in perpetuity

- for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea.

We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state. ...

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards.

By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian Land, and thus be reminded of the true history of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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