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Notes to Educators from Ryan: This project is from my 11th grade US History class. I included in my unit on social movements during the 1960s and 1970s. We read the Background of the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969. We also read and analyzed the proclamation issued by the protesters.

1969 OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ



California: From November 20, 1969, to June 11, 1971, Native Americans took over and held Alcatraz Island as Indian Land. The Occupation of Alcatraz Island" was led by the Native American group, Indians of All Tribes (IAT).

The take-over lasted 14-months and ended when the Indians were forcibly removed by the federal government.

Indians of All Tribes claimed the island by citing the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) between the U.S. and the Sioux. The treaty returned to Native peoples all retired, abandoned, and out of use federal lands. When Alcatraz penitentiary closed in 1963, the U.S. declared the island as surplus federal property. So Red Power activists reclaimed it.

On March 9, 1964, Richard McKenzie and other Sioux occupied Alcatraz for four hours.

On November 9, 1969, another group of activists returned. A boat carried Richard Oakes (Mohawk), Jim Vaughn (Cherokee), Joe Bill (Eskimo), Ross Harden (Ho-Chunk) and Jerry Hatch close to the island. Then the men jumped overboard, swam to shore, and claimed the island by right of discovery.

The Coast Guard quickly removed them.

Later that day, a larger group made their way to the island. Fourteen stayed overnight. The next day, the group proclaimed the island by right of discovery. Then they left the island.

On November 20, 1969, American Indians again landed on Alcatraz-- despite an attempted Coast Guard blockade. The 79 Indians included including students, married couples and six children which included actor Benjamin Bratt and his siblings.

To announce their action to the world, the dissidents issued the [Alcatraz Proclamation](#). The occupiers cited treatment under the Indian Termination policy as the reason. They also accused the U.S. of breaking numerous Indian treaties.



The IAT said they intended took the island over to build a Native American Studies center, spiritual center, an ecology center, and an American Indian Museum.



Richard Oakes sent a message to the San Francisco Department of the Interior:

“We invite the United States to acknowledge the justice of our claim. The choice now lies with the leaders of the American government - to use violence upon us as before to remove us from our

Great Spirit's land, or to institute a real change in its dealing with the American Indian. We do not fear your threat to charge us with crimes on our land. We and all other oppressed peoples would welcome spectacle of proof before the world of your title by genocide. Nevertheless, we seek peace.[2]"

President Richard Nixon's Special Counsel Leonard Garment took over negotiations.[2]

On Thanksgiving Day, hundreds of supporters made their way to Alcatraz to celebrate the Occupation. In December, John Trudell began daily radio broadcasts from the island. In January 1970, occupiers began publishing a newsletter.

Joseph Morris, a Blackfoot longshoreman, rented space on Pier 40 to transport supplies and people to the island.



Grace Thorpe, daughter of Jim Thorpe (Sac and Fox), was one occupier. She helped convince celebrities Jane Fonda, Anthony Quinn, Marlon Brando, Jonathan Winters, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Dick Gregory to visit the island in support. Rock band Creedence Clearwater Revival donated \$15,000 for a boat for reliable transport to Alcatraz. [

Then, in January 1970, 13-year-old Yvonne Oakes fell to her death. The Oakes family left Alcatraz, saying they didn't have the heart for it anymore. Some original occupiers left to return to school.

New occupiers soon came to the island, but several had drug addictions. People from San Francisco's drug and hippie culture joined them until non-Indians were prohibited from staying overnight.



By late May, the government had cut off all electrical power and telephone service. In June, a fire destroyed many buildings.

Left without power, fresh water, and declining public sympathy and support, occupiers began leaving the island. On June 11, 1971, a large force of government officers removed the last 15 people from Alcatraz.[2]

The Occupation of Alcatraz brought international attention to the plight of Native

peoples in the U.S. It also sparked more than 200 instances of civil disobedience among Native people. Some call the occupation "The cradle of the modern Native American civil rights movement."

The Alcatraz Occupation led to a yearly celebration of the rights of indigenous people. It also led to the island's "Unthanksgiving Day." All visitors are welcome to attend a dawn ceremony under permits by the National Park Service.

Note: While AIM (The American Indian Movement) is often credited with the takeover, AIM wasn't involved until later.

ALCATRAZ PROCLAMATION

To the Great White Father and his People 1969



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 this land, and hereby offer the following treaty: We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for 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 know that \$24 in trade goods for these sixteen acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of \$1.24 per acre is greater than the 47 cents per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their land. We will give to the inhabitants of this land a portion of

that land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian Government for as long as the sun

shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea -- to be administered by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs (BCA). We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our lifeways, 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 offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men. We feel that this Alcatraz Island is more than suitable as 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. The sanitation facilities are inadequate.
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 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 this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

Discussion Questions:

- ***How did the Native peoples who occupied Alcatraz bring attention to the plight of Native Americans across the country? Think civil disobedience.***
- ***How did the Alcatraz Proclamation point out the failures of the U.S. government?***

- **Although the Native Americans eventually abandoned the Alcatraz occupation, do you think the occupation was a success?**