



Siege at Wounded Knee, 1973

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A short history of the 71-day uprising of Native Americans at Wounded Knee. Armed American Indians occupied the territory, which they legally owned, with several demands, including an investigation into the 371 treaties signed between the Native Nations and the Federal Government, all of which had been broken by the United States.

In the summer of 1968, two hundred members of the American Indian community came together for a meeting to discuss various issues that Indian people of the time were dealing with on an everyday basis. Among these issues were, police brutality, high unemployment rates, and the Federal Government's policies concerning American Indians.

From this meeting came the birth of the American Indian Movement, commonly known as AIM. With this came the emergence of AIM leaders, such as Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt to name a few. Little did anyone know that AIM would become instrumental in shaping not only the path of American Indians across the country, but the eyes of the world would follow AIM protests through the occupation at Alcatraz through the Trail of Broken Treaties, to the final conflict of the 1868 Sioux treaty of the Black Hills. This conflict would begin on February 27, 1973 and last seventy-one days. The occupation became known in history as the Siege at Wounded Knee.

It began as the American Indians stood against government atrocities, and ended in an armed battle with US Armed Forces. Corruption within the BIA and Tribal Council at an all time high, tension on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation was on the increase and quickly getting out of control. With a feeling close to despair, and knowing there was nothing else for them to do, elders of the Lakota Nation asked the American Indian Movement for assistance. This bringing to a head, more than a hundred years of racial tension and a government corruption.

On that winter day in 1973, a large group of armed American Indians reclaimed Wounded Knee in the name of the Lakota Nation. For the first time in many decades, those Oglala Sioux ruled themselves, free

from government intervention, as is their ancient custom. This would become the basis for a TV movie, "Lakota Woman" the true story of Mary Moore Crowdog, and her experiences at the Wounded Knee occupation.

During the preceding months of the Wounded Knee occupation, civil war brewed among the Oglala people. There became a clear-cut between the traditional Lakota people and the more progressive minded government supporters. The traditional people wanted more independence from the Federal Government, as well as honoring of the 1868 Sioux treaty, which was still valid. According to the 1868 treaty, the Black Hills of South Dakota still belonged to the Sioux people, and the traditional people wanted the Federal Government to honor their treaty by returning the sacred Black Hills to the Sioux people.

Another severe problem on the Pine Ridge reservation was the strip mining of the land. The chemicals used by the mining operations were poisoning the land and the water. People were getting sick, and children were being born with birth defects. The tribal government and its supporters encouraged the strip mining and the sale of the Black Hills to the Federal Government. It is said that at that point in time, the tribal government was not much more than puppets of the BIA. The sacred Black Hills, along with many other problems, had become a wedge that would tear apart the Lakota Nation. Violent confrontations between the traditional people and the GOONS (Guardians of Our Oglala Nation) became an everyday occurrence.

The young AIM warriors, idealistic and defiant, were like a breath of fresh air to the Indian people, and their ideas quickly caught on. When AIM took control of Wounded Knee, over seventy-five different Indian Nations were represented, with more supporters arriving daily from all over the country. Soon United States Armed Forces in the form of Federal Marshals, and the National Guard surrounded the large group. All roads to Wounded Knee were cut off, but still, people slipped through the lines, pouring into the occupied area.

The forces inside Wounded Knee demanded an investigation into misuse of tribal funds; the goon squad's violent aggression against people who dared speak out against the tribal government. In addition they wanted the Senate Committee to launch an investigation into the BIA and the Department of the Interior regarding their handling of the affairs of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. The warriors also demanded an investigation into the 371 treaties between the Native Nations and the Federal Government, all of which had been broken by the United States.

The warriors that occupied Wounded Knee held fast to these demands and refused to lay down arms until they were met. The government cut off the electricity to Wounded Knee and attempted to keep all food supplies from entering the area.

For the rest of that winter, the men and women inside Wounded Knee lived on minimal resources, while they fought the armed aggression of Federal Forces. Daily, heavy gunfire was issued back and forth between the two sides, but true to their word, they refused to give up.

During the Wounded Knee occupation, they would live in their traditional manner, celebrating a birth, a marriage and they would mourn the death of two of their fellow warriors inside Wounded Knee. AIM member, Buddy Lamont was hit by M16 fire and bled to death inside Wounded Knee.

AIM member, Frank Clearwater was killed by heavy machine gun fire, inside Wounded Knee.

Twelve other individuals were intercepted by the goon squad while back packing supplies into Wounded Knee; they disappeared and were never heard from again. Though the government investigated, by looking for a mass grave in the area, when none was found the investigation was soon dismissed.

Wounded Knee was a great victory for the Oglala Sioux as well as all other Indian Nations. For a short period of time in 1973, they were a free people once more.

After 71 days, the Siege at Wounded Knee had come to an end; with the government making nearly 1,200 arrests. But this would only mark the beginning of what was known as the "Reign of Terror" instigated by the FBI and the BIA. During the three years following Wounded Knee, 64 tribal members were unsolved murder victims, 300 harassed and beaten, and 562 arrests were made, and of these arrests only 15 people were convicted of any crime. A large price to pay for 71 days as a free people on the land of one's ancestors.

