



Leonard Peltier

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Leonard Peltier, (born September 12, 1944, [Grand Forks, North Dakota, U.S.](#)), American Indian (mostly [Ojibwa](#)) activist who, after becoming one of the best-known [indigenous](#) rights activists in [North America](#), was convicted in 1977 of having murdered two [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#) agents. His case became a cause célèbre after the irregularities in his [extradition](#) and trial came to light, and his supporters consider him a [political prisoner](#).

Peltier was the 11th of 13 children. When his parents divorced four years after he was born, Peltier and a sister were sent to live with their paternal grandparents on the Turtle Mountain Reservation, situated in Rolette county in northern North Dakota. At age nine Leonard was sent to an Indian boarding school in [Wahpeton, North Dakota](#), and, after graduating, he was sent to Flandreau (South Dakota) Indian School, from which he dropped out in the ninth grade and went to live

with his father on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. It was there that his activism was ignited when he experienced firsthand the U.S. government policy of **termination**—the withdrawal of federal assistance, including food, from those Native Americans on reservations in an attempt to force their **assimilation** into Euro-American society.

Peltier moved to **Seattle** in 1965. As a part owner of an auto body shop, he employed other Native Americans and provided inexpensive repairs for those in need. During that time he helped found a **halfway house** for Native American former offenders. He also became involved in Native American land-claim issues, alcohol-abuse **counseling**, and the preservation of Native land in Seattle. In the late 1960s and early '70s, Peltier worked as a welder, carpenter, and **community counselor** and became involved with the **American Indian Movement (AIM)**, a militant **civil rights** organization; he eventually joined the **Denver** chapter. While working as a community counselor in Denver, Peltier invested most of his energy in AIM's programs. He got involved in a number of protests and rights actions, including the 1972 **Trail of Broken Treaties**, a cross-country event that ended with the occupation of the **Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)** offices in Washington, D.C. In the mid-1970s Peltier and other AIM members went to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in **South Dakota**. Their goal was to assist the Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge in planning community activities, religious ceremonies, and programs for self-sufficiency and to help organize security there.



On June 26, 1975, two FBI agents—Jack Coler and Ronald Williams—entered the Jumping Bull Ranch, allegedly to arrest Jimmy Eagle, who was wanted for burglary and whose vehicle they thought they had seen. Peltier and other AIM members were camping there. A shoot-out began between the FBI agents and the occupants of the vehicle they believed to be Eagle's. Many residents returned fire from the ranch. The identity of those who fired the first shots has never been established. AIM member Joe Stuntz was killed in the firefight. Both FBI agents were wounded by shots fired from a distance, and both were executed by shots to the head at point-blank range.

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Peltier, by that time a high-level AIM leader, as well as Darrell Dean Butler and Robert Robideau, all of whom had been present during the shoot-out, were charged with the murder of the two FBI agents, as was Eagle (charges against Eagle were later dropped). Peltier fled to Canada, allegedly convinced that he could not receive a fair trial in the United States, while Butler and Robideau were tried in a federal court and found not guilty of the murders. The rulings for Butler and Robideau were based on a lack of evidence linking the two men to the fatal shots and the exchange of gunfire from a distance, which appeared to be in self-defense.

Peltier eventually was arrested by the [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#) and later was extradited to the United States, almost exclusively on the basis of the testimony of Myrtle Poor Bear, a woman who ultimately was found to be mentally unstable and unable to testify at Peltier's trial. In 1977 Peltier was convicted on two counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. After his [conviction](#), the courts repeatedly rejected petitions for a new trial, though his lawyers continued to challenge his conviction on the basis of findings of judicial error in the original trial, fabrication of evidence, suppression of favourable evidence, coercion of witnesses, and

the U.S. government's admission of fraudulent behaviour. Among the many controversies associated with the Peltier case are these: there are no known witnesses to the deaths of the FBI agents; the gun that fired the fatal shots is not known; the identification of the vehicle that led the agents to Jumping Bull is in question; and the FBI has admitted to withholding thousands of documents pertaining to the case.

In 1979 Peltier was transferred to [Lompoc](#) (California) prison, where he learned of plans to "remove" him. Allegedly in fear for his life, Peltier escaped from Lompoc, but he was recaptured a few days later. An additional seven years were added to his two consecutive life sentences, but that judgment and sentence were later reversed. In 1985 he was transferred to Leavenworth penitentiary in [Leavenworth](#), Kansas. During his incarceration Peltier wrote *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (1999), edited by Harvey Arden. Peltier was moved in 2005 to the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere before ending up in Coleman, [Florida](#).

