



# The History of the American Indian Movement (AIM)

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## Voluntary

surrender after Alcatraz occupation. Bettmann Archive /  
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**T**he [American Indian Movement \(AIM\)](#) started in Minneapolis, Minn., in 1968 amid rising concerns about police brutality, [racism](#), substandard housing and joblessness in Native communities, not to mention long-held concerns about treaties broken by the U.S. government. Founding members of the organization included George Mitchell, Dennis Banks, Eddie Benton Banai, and Clyde Bellecourt, who rallied the Native American community to discuss these concerns. Soon the AIM leadership found itself fighting for tribal sovereignty, restoration of Native lands, preservation of indigenous cultures, quality education and healthcare for Native peoples.

“AIM is difficult to identify for some people,” the group states on its website. “It seems to stand for many things at once—the protection of treaty rights and the preservation of spirituality and culture. But what else? ...At the 1971 AIM national conference, it was decided that translating policy to practice meant building organizations—schools and housing and employment services. In Minnesota, AIM’s birthplace, that is exactly what was done.”

In its early days, AIM occupied abandoned property at a Minneapolis-area naval station to draw attention to the educational needs of Native youth. This led to the organization securing Indian education grants and establishing schools such as the Red School House and the Heart of the Earth Survival School that provided culturally relevant

education to indigenous young people. AIM also led to the formation of spin-off groups such as Women of All Red Nations, created to address women's rights, and the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media, created to address the use of Indian mascots by athletic teams. But AIM is most known for actions such as the Trail of Broken Treaties march, the occupations of [Alcatraz](#) and Wounded Knee and the Pine Ridge Shootout.

## Occupying Alcatraz

Native American activists, including AIM members, made international headlines in 1969 when they [occupied Alcatraz Island](#) on Nov. 20 to demand justice for indigenous peoples. The occupation would last for more than 18 months, ending on June 11, 1971, when U.S. Marshals recovered it from the last 14 activists who remained there. A diverse group of American Indians—including college students, couples with children and Natives from both reservations and urban areas—participated in the occupation on the island where Native leaders from the Modoc and Hopi nations faced incarceration in the 1800s. Since that time, treatment of indigenous peoples had yet to improve because the federal government had consistently ignored treaties, according to the activists. By bringing attention to the injustices Native Americans suffered, the Alcatraz occupation led government officials to address their concerns.

“Alcatraz was a big enough symbol that for the first time this century Indians were taken seriously,” the late historian [Vine Deloria Jr.](#) told *Native Peoples Magazine* in 1999.

## Trail of Broken Treaties March

AIM members held a march in Washington D.C. and occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in November 1972 to spotlight the concerns the American Indian community had about the federal government's policies towards indigenous peoples. They presented a

20-point plan to [President Richard Nixon](#) about how the government could resolve their concerns, such as restoring treaties, allowing American Indian leaders to address Congress, restoring land to Native peoples, creating a new office of Federal Indian Relations and abolishing the BIA. The march thrust the American Indian Movement into the spotlight.

## Occupying Wounded Knee

On February 27, 1973, AIM leader Russell Means, fellow activists, and Oglala Sioux members began an occupation of the town of Wounded Knee, S.D., to protest corruption in the tribal council, the U.S. government's failure to honor treaties to Native peoples and strip mining on the reservation. The occupation lasted for 71 days. When the siege came to an end, two people had died and 12 had been injured. A Minnesota court dismissed charges against the activists who participated in the Wounded Knee occupation due to prosecutorial misconduct after an eight-month trial. Occupying Wounded Knee had symbolic overtones, as it was the site where U.S. soldiers killed an estimated 150 Lakota Sioux men, women, and children in 1890. In 1993 and 1998, AIM organized gatherings to commemorate the Wounded Knee occupation.

## Pine Ridge Shootout

Revolutionary activity did not die down on the Pine Ridge Reservation after the Wounded Knee occupation. Oglala Sioux members continued to view its tribal leadership as corrupt and too willing to placate U.S. government agencies such as the BIA. Moreover, AIM members continued to have a strong presence on the reservation. In June 1975, AIM activists were implicated in the murders of two FBI agents. All were acquitted except for Leonard Peltier who was sentenced to life in prison. Since his conviction, there's been a large public outcry that Peltier is innocent. He and activist Mumia Abu-Jamal are among the

most high profile political prisoners in the U.S. Peltier's case has been covered in documentaries, books, news articles and a music video by the band [Rage Against the Machine](#).

## **AIM Winds Down**

By the late 1970s, the American Indian Movement began to unravel due to internal conflicts, incarceration of leaders and efforts on the part of government agencies such as the FBI and CIA to infiltrate the group. The national leadership reportedly disbanded in 1978. Local chapters of the group remained active, however.

## **AIM Today**

The American Indian Movement remains based in Minneapolis with several branches nationwide. The organization prides itself on fighting for the rights of Native peoples outlined in treaties and helping to preserve indigenous traditions and spiritual practices. The organization also has fought for the interests of aboriginal peoples in Canada, Latin America and worldwide. "At the heart of AIM is deep spirituality and a belief in the connectedness of all Indian people," the group states on its website.

AIM's perseverance over the years has been trying. Attempts by the federal government to neutralize the group, transitions in leadership and infighting have taken a toll. But the organization states on its website:

*"No one, inside or outside the movement, has so far been able to destroy the will and strength of AIM's solidarity. Men and women, adults and children are continuously urged to stay strong spiritually, and to*

*always remember that the movement is greater than  
the accomplishments or faults of its leaders.”*

