



Source: East Bay Times

## THE OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ: DEFENDING A ROCK, DEFENDING NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS

### POSSIBLE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Civil disobedience is defined as the peaceful refusal to obey certain laws or government demands that are considered unjust. Why do people engage in civil disobedience? Do you think it is an effective method to create change?
- What does it mean to refer to something as pan-Indian? Are there other examples of pan-Indian activity today?
- Historians say the while the occupation of Alcatraz ended without Native demands being met, it gave birth to a social gains and political movements that continues to this day. Do you agree?

### BACKGROUND

Alcatraz is a rocky island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. For thirty years, it was home to a maximum-security federal prison, housing some of the country's most dangerous criminals and gangsters. The prison was officially closed in 1963 and the property lay vacant for several years. In November of 1969 a group of several dozen Indigenous American young people traveled to the island by boat and began an occupation that lasted for eighteen months. They claimed a right to the land under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and under a federal policy that stated that all retired, abandoned or out-of-use federal land was to be returned to the Indigenous people from whom it was originally taken.

Men, women and children from many different Indigenous tribes took part in the occupation. They were Cheyenne, Eskimo, Mohawk, Shoshone, Ho-Chunk and more. They called themselves Indians of All Tribes (IOAT) and issued a proclamation demanding they be given the island to establish a Native American cultural center, school and library. This was especially timely as a Native American Cultural Center in San Francisco had recently burned down. Over the course of the occupation thousands of people came to show their support, while up to 400 lived there semi-permanently.

Because the occupation lasted for more than a year, a great deal of organization was needed to provide food, shelter and schooling for the children, to communicate to the outside world and to negotiate with the U.S. government. Many problems also emerged as people disagreed about leadership, tactics and how to deal with the federal government.

Influenced by the civil rights struggle of African Americans in the 1960s, the occupation of Alcatraz by young Indigenous people has been called the first pan-Indian act of civil disobedience in modern history. Many people say it brought the issue of the treaty rights and sovereignty of Indigenous people to the foreground – a discussion that continues to this day.

## RESOURCES

### Articles

- [Antigovernment Graffiti Restored, Courtesy of Government \(The NY Times\)](#)
- [When Native American Activists Occupied Alcatraz Island \(History\)](#)
- [1969 Alcatraz Takeover 'Changed the Whole Course of History' \(CNN\)](#)
- [1969 Occupation of Alcatraz \(Cusick School District\)](#)
- [Return to Alcatraz: National Park Service Honors Native American Occupation 50th Anniversary \(San Francisco Public Press\)](#)

### Background

- [Alcatraz Proclamation \(Found\)](#)
- [We Hold the Rock \(National Park Service\)](#)

### Videos

- [We Hold the Rock](#)
- [Debate on the Rock: The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz](#)
- [50th Anniversary of Alcatraz Occupation](#)
- [Occupation of Alcatraz Collection \(Diva\)](#)