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A Reminiscence of the Alcatraz Occupation

EDWARD D. CASTILLO

With bittersweet fondness, I recall my grandmother's gift of a white shirt and a tie she thought I would need to attend college in the late 1960s. How could she have known? No one in my family had ever graduated from high school, let alone attempted college. I still clearly remember my only visit to a high school counselor who was perplexed by this skinny, dark-skinned youth who kept enrolling in college prep courses. "Don't you understand that you will never get into a fraternity? Why not take auto shop?" At that time, I did not even know what a fraternity was.

Being stubborn and determined to become an architect, I persisted and finally enrolled in the huge, somewhat intimidating University of California at Riverside (about three thousand students). I felt uncomfortable and isolated in the classroom, as most Indian students still feel today. As a result, I withdrew into the last row and cocooned myself in a blanket of uncommunicative silence.

I spent my entire undergraduate career without Native American peers or role models. There were no staff, counselors, or faculty with whom I could share my self-doubts or my anxious dreams for the future. Because the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) had administratively decided not to make higher education scholarships available to California Indians, I was denied support. Consequently, I worked two and sometimes three jobs, year round, to earn money to pay for my education.

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Because my grandfather and my father were passionately interested in the past and the old days, I gradually was drawn to the field of history, particularly the history of my own people. Unfortunately, such courses were not available in the curriculum at that time. As a compromise, I majored in American frontier history, but I was always more interested in the various Indians on the largely ignored "other side" of the frontier.

I took a minor in Latin American studies that I hoped would provide me with an understanding of borderlands Indian-Spanish encounters in California and elsewhere. Because I was one of three minority students in the undergraduate population, my Latin American studies professors occasionally would turn to me after describing some Hispanic custom or belief and ask, "Is that not correct, Mr. Castillo?" I usually just embarrassingly nodded my head or ignored the question altogether. Finally, when I wrote my senior thesis on the Kumeyaay Indian destruction of Mission San Diego in 1775, my advisor asked me if I was, in fact, an American Indian. After I confirmed his insightful suspicion, he demanded to know why I had not raised the issue before. My response was that I did not think anybody cared, and, besides, no one had ever asked!

Following my graduation in 1969, I accepted a minority counseling position at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Largely because competing pressures to hire Blacks or Hispanics could not be resolved, I was hired as a compromise. One of my duties was to develop a resource guide to higher education programs for minority students. Seeking information, I called UCLA and was connected with a faculty member of the brand new American Indian High Potential Program in Campbell Hall. After speaking to me for a while, she asked if I thought I could teach American Indian history to a select group of about sixty American Indian students who had been provisionally admitted to the university. I was young and ignorant of the great responsibility this job entailed, so I declared quickly that I could do it.

I will never forget ascending the steps of Campbell Hall and being stunned by the ominous sight of a large patch of dried blood. During my interview, I inquired about that disturbing vision and was informed that a murder had been committed on that site as the result of a rivalry between Black factions on the campus prior to my arrival. This disturbing news, however, did not deter me from deciding to accept an on-the-spot offer to join the all-American Indian faculty that was being formed to work

with native students from all over the country. This was what I had quietly dreamed of throughout my undergraduate career.

I was shocked when I met the students for the first time. About half of them were, in fact, older than my tender twenty years. Nevertheless, it was an electrifying experience to actually meet Indian college students. They were, in large part, eager to learn and had high expectations for themselves. There were, however, some more surprises in store for me. As we were introduced by name and tribe, many of the students from tribes outside of California were amazed that any California Indians still survived. I was further chagrined to learn from some of the older students that many had, in fact, come to California under the BIA's relocation program years earlier and had had their transportation, their vocational and sometimes academic training, their housing, and even their furniture bought for them by the program. I was dismayed to think that I had struggled through my undergraduate years without so much as a cent from the bureau. This was the beginning of my practical learning about how the BIA pitted one group of Indians against another by offering tempting rewards for cooperation. Countless other examples followed this one and ultimately led to enlightenment.

I had always wanted to take a course in American Indian history, and now, ironically, I was assigned to teach the class I had so desperately sought as an undergraduate. I worked fifteen hours a day preparing my lectures and discussion groups. In retrospect, I realize that the entire faculty of our program was seeking to forge a Native American perspective in our various specialties of history, literature, art, and other fields. It was a challenging and powerful reorientation for our students, many of whom were exposed for the first time to a systematic grounding in the national American Indian experience. Student reactions varied from stunned disbelief to growing impatience for change. All around us, other minority groups were making great strides in their political, social, and employment pursuits. Inevitably, many of us began itching to demonstrate publically our frustration about the many grievances our people held.

I was especially outraged about the systematic disinterment of Indian burials and the routine archaeological digs that the universities continued to mount despite a diminishing return of meaningful data from these activities that were so offensive to us. I gathered a number of student and faculty followers and suggested that we dig up some nineteenth-century Indian fighter

buried nearby. We were in the middle of planning activities for that action when, at a faculty meeting in mid-November 1969, our director, Ponca historian Roger Buffalohead, announced that a Mohawk student from San Francisco State University wanted to address our students concerning a proposal for a demonstration in San Francisco. His name was Richard Oakes.

I clearly recall Oakes's speech to our students. He made a positive impression: He was a handsome adult, solidly built. Although he obviously was not a polished public speaker, he delivered his message with simplicity and power. I was delighted to hear that he proposed to lead a coalition of American Indian students from San Francisco State, UC Berkeley, and UC Riverside to occupy the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island. The action would be carried out under the pan-Indian group called Indians of All Tribes. He then read the declaration that explained the reasons for seizing the island. Cleverly, it made truthful comparisons between Alcatraz and Indian reservations (i.e., isolation, lack of running water, lack of employment) and, better still, offered to pay the government twenty-four dollars in trinkets for the land!

Oakes's proposal was the catalyst that caused the ethnic ferment among our students to reach a boiling point. One of them was a multisyllable-word-spouting "leader" of a national youth group for Indians who fancied himself at the forefront of the "Indian movement." His sense of self-importance caused him to oppose any student's joining a demonstration that was not led by him. This was the first of my many lessons in Indian leadership, where egotism could prevent one from supporting another's ideas or actions.

The rest of the students struggled with a decision involving the real possibility of being arrested and, of course, having their education disrupted. My own reaction evolved from enthusiastic support to more serious reflection: "Oh, no. Here we go again." At that time, all of California's professional Indian leadership positions were held by Indians from out of state. This grated on those of us who were from California tribes, but the non-California Indians could not comprehend our concern. More troubling still, these leaders would be claiming California Indian land based on a treaty the government had made with the Lakota Indians! After some serious thought, though, I decided the positive potential would outweigh the negative. I would take part in the proposed demonstration with hopes that other California Indians would

participate as well. I reasoned that we would go to the island, make our stand, be arrested, and then attempt to get the message to the nation that the native peoples of America were being seriously neglected in the civil rights struggle. I notified my boss, who was both understanding and supportive. No one considered for a moment that the occupation might last for nearly two years!

About half of our students decided to participate. We packed our things, and a number of the students checked out university cars to drive to San Francisco. It was arranged that we would all meet at the San Francisco Indian Center. Being a professional and a high roller, I decided to fly up to the city. I recall that the ticket cost twenty-one dollars. I was picked up at the airport by some of my students, and we proceeded to the San Francisco Indian Center prior to our embarkation. It was the evening of 19 November 1969, a night I will never forget.

When our group arrived at the Indian center, a rancorous debate was under way in a meeting of perhaps two hundred people. A tall, long-haired, non-Indian biker-type (with what appeared to be an Indian wife) was expressing his apprehension about the wisdom of the proposed Alcatraz enterprise. Abruptly, someone jumped up from the audience and punched the biker's lights out. Apparently, the time for debate had passed. Thereafter, the discussion turned to logistical questions about our transportation to the island.

As the meeting broke up, Richard Oakes invited me to accompany him to the boats located at the Berkeley marina. We made at least one stop for a drink "to keep our courage up," as someone later explained. When we arrived at the Berkeley Marina, Oakes located the designated boat, but the skipper suddenly erupted into an agitated harangue. After a short while, Oakes walked back to the caravan of cars to tell us that the "chicken-shit coward" now refused to transport us to the island. Oakes later explained that the captain feared the coast guard had been alerted to this new attempt to take over the island, and he believed his boat would be confiscated. Fortunately, we had a back-up boat and captain at the Sausalito Marina across the bay.

There followed yet another trip across the Bay Bridge, through San Francisco, and over the Golden Gate Bridge. It was my first sight of that famous landmark, and I studied it with a degree of awe. The night was clear and cold, with just a hint of fog coming through the channel. We soon arrived at the Sausalito Marina and,

although we did not realize it at the time, abandoned our vehicles. We proceeded quickly aboard our boat, and the captain, apparently more courageous or perhaps more foolish than the other, immediately got under way. The ride was smooth despite the extraordinary overloading of the boat.

Just before we approached a barge that was tied to the island's dock, Oakes urged us all to take different routes up to the warden's house located at the top of the island, across from the main cellblock. We were apprehensive that the authorities had been notified and were waiting to arrest us en masse. As soon as we docked, the seventy-eight college students (including at least two government informants) scrambled across the barge and headed up the road. I ran around the exercise yard behind the main cellblock and, after a tortuous maze of detours, emerged in the plaza in front of the main cellblock. Across the way, I could see a number of our group gathered in a mission-style, two-story house with smoke just beginning to waft from its stately chimney. This was the warden's house.

I joined my fellow tribesmen and women in breaking up some old wooden folding chairs to feed the fire that we needed to fend off the damp chill permeating the island. I was especially chilled; being ignorant about the climate of northern California, I had worn only a denim workshirt, a corduroy sport jacket, and a cotton blanket. My feet were covered with high-top moccasins. I was miserably cold and often damp for the next fifteen weeks.

Soon someone produced a small drum, and we began to sing Plains Indian songs. In this manner, we amused ourselves for the rest of the night. Sometime just before dawn, one of the women produced our food supplies, consisting of two loaves of white bread, fifty slices of baloney, an equal number of slices of American cheese, a six-pack of Coke, and a pound of coffee. Just then, the caretaker of the island, a GSA employee, approached the house to inquire about our presence there. It was a good thing he was calm and had a sense of humor, because, if he had begun to act hostile, we might have torn him apart. We were very pumped up. As things turned out, he was courteous and friendly. No doubt he had already experienced the previous takeover attempts made by much smaller groups of Indians. After informing him of our purpose, we allowed him to return to his quarters and notify the authorities of our actions. Oakes then asked us to round up the other participants, who were scattered throughout the abandoned structures, to discuss our next moves.

We gathered under gray clouds, in the plaza in front of the main cellblock. It was clear from the discussion that followed that we fully expected to be arrested that day by federal marshals. The idea of resistance was debated; some boasted that they would not be taken off the island on their feet, while others declared their intention of going limp when arrested and surrendering under protest. I suspect that many, like myself, were willing to be arrested but would offer physical resistance if we saw any of our fellow participants being abused by the authorities. Lookouts were placed at strategic observation points to alert us to the arrival of police authorities.

Following the breakup of our meeting, the caretaker returned to the warden's house, where many of us were huddled around an anemic fire. We were surprised to discover that he had brought coffee for us. He explained also that his wife would be happy to offer shower and toilet facilities to the females from our group. Our conversation was interrupted by the ominous sound of a hovering helicopter, which we immediately assumed belonged to the federal marshals. However, it turned out to be newspaper reporters. The media circus was beginning.

Over the next five days, the expected confrontation and arrests failed to materialize. The coast guard did, however, place a blockade around the island to prevent reinforcements and food from reaching us. In keeping with the highest standards of political theater, some of us fashioned bows and arrows from materials at hand and carried out our historic role of showering arrows upon any coast guard cutter foolish enough to come too close to the docking barge at the island's landing. Both the "white-eyes" and the Indians rocked with laughter during such "Indian attacks."

During those early days of the blockade, much excitement was created by well-wishers attempting to deliver food, water, and supplies to us. I recall one dramatic episode when, in the early afternoon, a motor-powered Chinese junk rammed one of the patrol vessels. This incident naturally drew the other coast guard cutter to the collision site. Apparently, there had been a plan to cause a diversion on the south side of the landing so that supplies could be unloaded from a small fleet of pleasure boats to the north. After witnessing the collision, we ran up to the courtyard in front of the main cellblock and were directed to a series of ladders that descended to a small pebble beach on the north side of the island. There we saw boats coming in close, the inhabitants tossing

canned hams, bottles of water, and other food supplies ashore. At that point, we formed a chain of hands stretching from the beach up the steep cliff side, where some of us were clinging to the ladders and handing the supplies upward. It was an exhilarating experience that provoked many laughs and much bragging by all. This was our first substantial resupply, and we consumed it with enthusiasm.

A few days later, one of the island's strangest characters, a ubiquitous Eskimo named Joe Bill, jumped off the landing barge to compel the coast guard to rescue him. This tactic would allow several blockade runners to make a quick pass at the dock and toss out food and water to us. Our hilarity quickly turned to fear at the realization that the water was about forty-two degrees, and hypothermia and death threatened our brother. Worse still, the treacherous tide was going out, dragging Joe Bill towards the Golden Gate at a frightening pace. Fortunately, he was rescued, and we got even more supplies.

During the first few days of the occupation, we held a formal meeting to institute a governing body for the island's population. That meeting revealed some not-so-flattering character flaws and giant egos among the politically inclined. I was surprised to find myself nominated and elected to the office of chief of security. At first, I was honored. Among my responsibilities was that of enforcing a drug- and alcohol-free populous. The first attempt by this 155-pound individual to confiscate a joint from a group of young adults (each weighing at least 180 pounds) quickly convinced me of my lack of qualifications for the job. Others soon assumed the job, although without any appreciable improvement in efficiency.

I'm not sure Oakes or any of the other planners had been conscious of the proximity of our demonstration to the Thanksgiving holiday, but it proved to be exactly the kind of tie-in that unimaginative reporters sought to make with this "new" minority group's unique political action. As the Thanksgiving holiday approached, mainland supporters organized a huge turkey dinner, with live music for the island's Indian population. Just prior to that date, the coast guard blockade was called off.

Thanksgiving morning, I awoke to the sound of a thunderously loud rock band that had been towed on a barge to our dock. They used car batteries to power their electric music. It was a nice gesture from a sincere group of musicians. By now, network and international reporters were regularly helicoptered to the island

to report on the unexpected survival of American Indians and their clever demonstration. An especially large contingent turned up on Thanksgiving morning. Hundreds of Native American supporters also began to arrive with the Thanksgiving turkeys supplied by the Rathskeller Restaurant of San Francisco and others.

The Thanksgiving dinner was served in the exercise court off the main cellblock. A Chumash elder gave a blessing, and we lined up for one of the best turkey dinners I can recall—perhaps because a well-prepared, warm meal was something few of us had enjoyed for a week.

We now were deluged with numerous supporters and supplies and a growing river of funds. Within a few weeks, John Fogerty, of the popular rock group Creedence Clearwater Revival, donated a fishing boat to the island's growing population. The press and media reports were becoming more analytical and were beginning to explore the conditions of Indian peoples nationwide. We were delighted that our demonstration had triggered some significant national reflection on the status of American Indians within American society. Unfortunately, our successful efforts bore within them the seeds of our dream's demise.

The open forum meeting styles of the island's governing body became a focus of discontent for a growing number of island residents. Most of these individuals had arrived more recently, some with serious addiction problems. Many were older, frustrated, unemployed semiprofessionals. Eventually, a power struggle erupted between Richard Oakes and this other faction. Media attention and control of the tens of thousands of dollars being donated to the Alcatraz cause were at the root of most of the problems. Intimidation and violence became the all-too-frequent responses from the small but destructive faction that challenged the college students who had successfully inaugurated our occupation.

Soon after the power struggle began, Oakes's daughter Yvonne fell several stories in a stairwell of the staff apartment building where she and her family lived. She died a few days later. Immediately, there was speculation that her tragic death was a result of the growing violence and intimidation against Oakes and other original participants.

I recognized clearly that power and money were at the heart of our problems. This was about a month into the occupation. Christmas was approaching, and I was both cold and filthy. I had

not bathed since 19 November, and I decided to ask the island's leadership for twenty-two dollars and passage to the mainland to get a hotel room and clean up. I invited a recently arrived young female to accompany me to "see the city." The bath we shared was one of the most memorable I have ever experienced. Clean bodies, clean sheets, and a warm room—what a change! The next day I bought new, warm clothes and shoes, and, after a couple of restaurant meals and phone calls to my parents and grandparents, I returned to the island.

I still recall feeling uncomfortable about asking for the hotel room money. By then, I was convinced that major financial ripoffs had been perpetrated by those who controlled the island's finances. I was a relatively well-paid professional compared to others on the island, and I could afford to be critical. Nevertheless, I felt I had now participated in taking money.

More troubling still was the inner conflict I was experiencing over my responsibilities at UCLA that I had abandoned so abruptly. I could see which way the leadership was drifting, and I did not like what I was witnessing. Richard Oakes left the island after his daughter was killed. Rumors abounded concerning her death. Some speculated she was shoved. It was clear to many of us that our original idealism was being replaced by cynical and frankly embarrassing self-declared "leaders" whose interests were more financial and political in nature.

I finally made the fateful decision to leave the island and return to UCLA to fulfill my teaching contract. I was proud of my participation in the occupation, but my personal disillusionment with the unexpected developments of our demonstration left me uneasy. Within a year, I had entered graduate school in UC Berkeley's Department of History and had begun a serious academic career— punctuated by participation in several more attempted land takeovers modeled after the Alcatraz example. Some of those, like the effort of the Pit River Indians in Shasta County, ended in brutal law enforcement attacks on demonstrators. These experiences, for me, drove home the difference between occupation-type encounters in liberal urban areas and those outside of such locales: Rural land takeovers were met with bitter opposition and frequent violence. I soon came to understand that what we had accomplished at Alcatraz was more political theater than substance. I realized that the future of Indian self-determination and economic self-sufficiency lay not in more government entitlement programs that fostered dependency but

in the establishment of adequate land bases that can provide Indian residents the opportunity to make a decent living.

I was bitterly disappointed by the self-destructive nature of the leadership following Richard Oakes's departure from Alcatraz. This does not mean I was a blindly loyal supporter of Oakes; I understood his shortcomings. In retrospect, however, I believe I made the correct decision to stand by him. Events following his departure seem to have validated that perception.

Many of the original seventy-eight college students who participated in the 20 November takeover have gone on to responsible, productive, and successful careers. Fellow Luiseño Indian Dennis Turner became an effective tribal chairman of the Rincon Indian Reservation in Southern California and today runs a successful business on his reservation. Creek Indian Linda Arrenado is a physician in Sonoma County. Luwana Quitiquit, a Robinson Creek Pomo, is a former tribal administrator and current director of Ya-Ka Ama (a land takeover effort that has become an educational and native plant business on twenty-three acres of prime Sonoma County agricultural land along the Russian River). Pomo Indian Rosalie Willie completed a library degree at UC Berkeley and administers the Native American studies library on that campus. Sac and Fox Indian Dennis Jennings is a prominent community activist with the International Treaty Council in San Francisco.

I was surprised when I returned home to find my parents and grandparents in support of my participation in the Alcatraz occupation. I recalled their opposition to street demonstrations by other minorities during the early turbulence of the civil rights movement and did not expect the approval they expressed. Over the intervening years, I grew more cynical about what our efforts at Alcatraz had accomplished. After all, our loss of the island was attributable as much to the abuses of incompetent leadership and the anarchy and hypocrisy of urban Indian politics as to the government's efforts against us. Yet, more and more frequently, I encounter Indian people of my generation and younger who, on learning of my participation in that effort, describe the profound effect it had on their lives and their perceptions of what was possible for Indian people. Even some of the founding members of the American Indian Movement have publically credited Alcatraz as a catalyst for their own political coming-of-age.

A fairly widely distributed poster for the Alcatraz occupation featured a photo, taken by a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, of

me—very emaciated, unwashed, cold—and a young woman huddled under a blanket, with the bold declaration, “Alcatraz Is Not An Island.” I keep a framed copy of that poster in my home to amuse my friends and guests. Imagine my surprise when, recently, one of my undergraduate students returned from a Grateful Dead concert with a t-shirt she had purchased with that same image on it!

The occupation of Alcatraz Island was a seminal event in the modern American Indian civil rights movement. For that reason, I set aside my responsibilities and research commitments to reflect on the nearly three months I participated in the occupation.