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# Subaltern Resistance and Wounded Knee, 1973

*Nathan Sell*

American Indian resistance to Euro-American expansionism has long been considered under the purview of “American history.” This subsumption of indigenous perspectives within the limits and boundaries of an “American history” represents a, if not the, dominant *raison d'être* for considering indigenous histories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such, indigenous history under this perspective is potentially seen as useful only in that it holds explanatory value in the context of an American history. No single event in the past four-hundred plus years shatters that aforementioned account more thoroughly than the siege of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973. The siege was a seventy-one day armed standoff between federal agents and a collection of American Indian protesters, and this event represents the most dramatic and critical challenge to the authority of the United States’ government regarding its subjugation of the indigenous peoples in the territory it now claims as its own.<sup>1</sup> From the onset of the siege, protestors with local roots at the Pine Ridge Reservation had difficulty ensuring their complaints were represented and understood by both the national and international media and by the federal and tribal governments as the narrative quickly became another part of the long-running tension and conflict between the United States federal government and national American Indian activists.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to critically examine the nature of American Indian resistance at Wounded Knee, this paper argues that local Oglala Lakota traditionalists held primary agency in resisting American imperialism during the siege of Wounded Knee even though accounts of the siege generally credit the American Indian Movement with instigating and leading the resistance. As such, American Indian resistance to a persistent imperial condition at Wounded Knee in 1973 had a critical subaltern component that historical analyses have generally underrepresented in their treatment of the siege. Concerning the theoretical and methodological basis for this project, this paper considers American Indian resistance to European and later Euro-American expansion to be well within the boundaries of the history of imperialism.

Given the political, historical, and cultural complexities inherent in using specific terms to refer to groups of people, it is necessary to briefly clarify the use of terms within the analysis. Terms such as “American Indian,” “Native American,” “Amerindian,” “First Nations,” and “indigenous peoples of North America” all exist to essentialize and simplify the diverse array of people “discovered” in North America by Europeans so that those peoples would be understood as something “other” to Europeans. This act of naming was and remains part of an imperial discourse. Thus, the use of a general terms like “Native American” or “American Indian” is unavoidably problematic and deeply political. In order to be open and explicit about this discourse, this paper will predominantly use the term “American Indian” for the simple reason that this is the term used by the American Indian Movement which understands itself and its resistance as part of a unified project that encompasses the multitude of American Indian nations and peoples. However, it should be noted that this paper intends to reference specific groups

rather than general terms whenever possible. It should not be assumed that a reference to the Oglala Lakota fully equates in some way to the term American Indian, and conversely use of the term American Indian does not necessarily refer to the Oglala Lakota. While reference to a specific group does call forth a relation to the larger group, this analysis will assume that the two are largely distinct from one another even if they are linked in many ways.

In Patrick Wolfe's review of contemporary theory in imperial history, he noted that theories of imperialism generally do not account for cases of "settler colonialism," whereby the colonizer establishes a permanent residence among the colonized, such as in the case of North America and Australia.<sup>3</sup> The starkest distinction between these forms of imperialism and those often described in the history of imperialism, paradigmatically so in imperial histories of Asia and Africa, is that settler colonialism does not have a colonial-postcolonial demarcation; rather, the imperialism is continuous throughout the course of the entirety of American Indian history at the point of their conflict with Euro-Americans and beyond. The general non-inclusion of the conquest and subjugation of indigenous peoples in North America by Euro-Americans as part of historiographical accounts of imperialism and colonialism means that otherwise quite common theoretical treatments of imperialism are not given to these cases of settler colonialism. This oversight is odd given that such applications of theories of imperialism would potentially have more impact in the cases of existing and continuing imperial contexts, at least more so than cases where a postcolonial condition has arisen. Thus, any analysis of American Indian activism and resistance that starts from the presupposition that the nature of this analysis is within the situational framework of imperialism has inherent political implications. Similarly, the presentation of American Indian history in the United States as either atheoretical or apolitical in constitution is itself making a claim about the colonial condition of American Indian peoples whether that presentation admits it or not (i.e. choosing not to call American Indian histories in the United State imperial in nature does itself render a claim about imperialism). For these reasons, this paper will explicitly describe its analysis in terms of resisting an imperial order.

Given these outlined considerations, Marxist and postcolonial historiographies have made great use of "uncovering" narratives and histories from those not represented in elitist-bourgeoisie accounts, and the subaltern school of Indian colonial history may prove especially viable with regards to American Indian resistance. A key theoretical disposition from the subaltern school argues that histories of imperialism that focus on elite or overly essentialized or simplified actors carries with it critical and fundamental biases that impede a full understanding of the resistance to imperialism *in toto*.<sup>4</sup> One pertinent examination of subaltern resistance is to be found in Gyan Pandey's analysis of divergent interests and methods between local peasants in Awadh and the elite-led Indian National Congress during the 1920s. Interestingly, both factions had overlapping opposition towards the British Raj, but the hierarchy between the different resisting factions created its own form of subimperialism with respect to the peasants.<sup>5</sup> In the process of challenging the imperial structure, certain figures and factions presented themselves and were presented by the political order as emblemizing the essentialized vision of the resistance. Pandey's thesis may prove particularly valuable in terms of elaborating upon similar

trends within the context of Euro-American imperialism if it can be shown that factionalism and hierarchy between resisting agents existed in American Indian opposition to the United States during the course of the siege.

If it is accepted that American Indian resistance is an on-going project, the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973 represents an especially powerful case study into examining the nature of this resistance. However, it was not simply the scale of the siege. Rather, the siege grew out of a dense cluster of antagonisms: the denial of political self-determination for American Indian nations, the cronyism of some tribal governments on US reservations,<sup>6</sup> the economic malaise found on reservations like Pine Ridge,<sup>7</sup> the rampant racism and discrimination of the reservation bordertowns,<sup>8</sup> and the general lack of concern for the well-being of American Indian peoples by the United States government. As such, the siege was a complex interplay between these various factors, and they make an analysis of Wounded Knee, 1973, a particularly interesting case to determine the extent in which subalternity exists in American Indian resistance to Euro-American imperialism.

Previous studies of the siege and their historiography centers around the American Indian Movement (AIM) and considers Wounded Knee as a particularly vivid flashpoint within the organization's chronology. Broadly speaking, these works can be divided into two distinct subsets: those that are favorable towards AIM and those that are unfavorable towards AIM. Representing the former disposition, Peter Matthiessen's *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, Paul Smith and Robert Warrior's *Like a Hurricane*, and to a certain degree Robert Burnette and John Koster's *The Road to Wounded Knee* focus on the genesis of AIM as a mostly urban, Pan-American Indian awakening of sorts that began to actively promote American Indian self-determination. Regarding the latter subset, Rolland Dewing's *Wounded Knee: the Meaning and Significance of the Second Incident* portrays the siege as mostly a law enforcement problem against misguided American Indian radicals. Contrary to both subsets, Akim Reinhardt's *Ruling Pine Ridge* provides an analysis that links the political history of the Pine Ridge Reservation dating back to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. However, this account is the exception as the majority of the historiography of Wounded Knee II explicitly tie the narrative of the siege in with the emergence of AIM. This paper maintains that more historiographical work needs to be done regarding Wounded Knee aside from examinations revolving around the rise and fall of AIM, and it is the hope of this paper that it can, in some small measure, add to the discussion of the siege from the perspective of those on the reservation.

In the literature, there does exist an often unacknowledged but crucial distinction regarding the ultimate causation of the siege. Dewing's account argues that it was the economic strife on the Pine Ridge Reservation that then led discontented individuals to seek assistance from political radicals in AIM.<sup>9</sup> The insinuation by Dewing is that had the economic condition of the reservation been improved, then the siege would not have occurred. This claim frames the siege as politically misguided but economically pertinent. On the other hand, accounts like Smith and Warrior's place prime import on political unease and angst at the national level, as these feelings had begun to percolate and take shape as a Pan-American Indian identity emerged where

none had existed before.<sup>10</sup> A variation of this thread rests with Reinhardt whereby local political conditions and disaffection on the Pine Ridge regarding the Oglala Sioux Tribal government (OST) and its tribal council (OSTC) had ceased to function in the interests of its people.<sup>11</sup> For accounts favoring political causation over economic causation, the siege's existence is tied to the imperial condition, but the accounts either favor national or local politics as the causal factor. In an effort to resolve whether politics or economics lies at the heart of the siege, it is telling that the initial demands the protesters had made immediately after the siege began were a mix of national and local political changes. Of the three demands, the first one requests that the United States Senate initiate hearings on American Indian nations' treaty rights while the subsequent two requests seek investigations of administrative practices at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the OST.<sup>12</sup> The nature of these demands strongly implies that the main concern of the protesters was political rather than economic. Thus, it is necessary to understand the basic outline of the political history of the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Reinhardt considers one of the root causes of the siege to be the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA).<sup>13</sup> Prior to the IRA, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 had recognized the Oglala Lakota as an autonomous nation that had the right to political self-determination within a territory that covers much of the northern Great Plains.<sup>14</sup> However, the IRA altered this position and now considered American Indian nations within and under the governmental structure of the United States, specifically within the US Department of the Interior rather than having nations, like the Oglala Lakota, engage with the United States via the State Department.<sup>15</sup> While the Pine Ridge Reservation voted to accept the conditions of the IRA, a large contingent of the Oglala Lakota still recognized the traditional authority of the chiefs and medicine men rather than the governing body of the OSTC. Over time, two factions arose on the Pine Ridge Reservation: a mostly "full-blood" Oglala Lakota faction of traditionalists that argued the implementation of the IRA was flawed and needed to be changed, and a mostly "mixed-blood" faction that preferred to operate under the provisions outlined by the IRA.<sup>16</sup> At the time of the siege, the main leader of the local traditionalists was the eldest chief of the Oglala, Frank Fools Crow, who often articulated, in religious terms, a necessary shift back to the governing framework outlined by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty.<sup>17</sup> This general antagonism between full-blood traditionalists who spoke Lakota and followed the old religion and the mixed-bloods who spoke English and had adopted Christianity would come to a head with the election of Richard "Dick" Wilson as chairman of the OSTC in 1972.<sup>18</sup>

Wilson's rise to power had been contentious from the very beginning. He has been alternately accused of being backed by rich Euro-American ranching interests in the border towns<sup>19</sup> or being funded by the United States federal government as a proxy that would provide easy access to uranium deposits on the Pine Ridge Reservation during the height of the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Wilson faced growing traditionalist opposition after he began using tribal funds to benefit himself and his supporters. Several instances indicate that Wilson's politicking and backroom dealings generated much of the bad feelings between the two factions on the reservation. Traditionalist Severt Young Bear, in an interview with Akwesasne Notes in 1973,

cited Wilson's altering of a housing development project in the full-blood strongholds of Porcupine and Wanblee where he renegotiated and gave the contract to political donors in Rapid City, South Dakota, after a reservation construction company had already been awarded the contract during the previous chairman's tenure.<sup>21</sup> Another Oglala traditionalist, Geraldine Janis, noted that Wilson had assigned his wife as director of the reservation Head Start Program, which was appropriated \$143,000 in federal funds. She noted that Wilson's friends and family would get exorbitant bonuses throughout the year even as the various federally funded programs were running out of cash for their operations.<sup>22</sup> These cases led a number of traditionalists to seek Wilson's impeachment.

Amid this rising opposition on the reservation, Wilson began the process of ousting his rivals in the OSTC. Rather than confront his opposition in direct terms, Wilson began a systematic effort to both tie local opposition to his chairmanship to the American Indian Movement and to discredit and confront prominent traditionalists by reason of their association with AIM. In November of 1972, he fired the OSTC vice president, David Long, for his alleged connections to AIM.<sup>23</sup> Later, Wilson passed Tribal Ordinance 072-04 which limited public assembly if a "riot" was imminent,<sup>24</sup> and afterwards he passed Tribal Ordinance 072-55 which blamed AIM for the destruction of tribal documents during AIM's takeover of BIA headquarters in Washington in November of 1972 and effectively barred AIM from the reservation.<sup>25</sup> Further measures against his opposition were framed as a means to protect tribal records from AIM given their past history with the BIA incident. In an ironic turn of events, Wilson had previously supported AIM in their protest of Nebraska law enforcement with the gruesome torture and murder of Pine Ridge resident Raymond Yellow Thunder in a Nebraska border town by five white men who sought to "ruff up an Indian" and were only charged with involuntary manslaughter.<sup>26</sup> However, his adversarial attitude towards AIM and those he branded as AIM sympathizers became resolute and vehement after AIM's takeover of BIA headquarters in Washington.

Curiously, AIM had not established a large presence on the reservation, and it was not the goal of AIM leadership to focus on Pine Ridge. Rather, they began planning protests in Rapid City, South Dakota, to protest the racial and economic injustices suffered by American Indians there. Dennis Banks, a person of Ojibwa descent and one of AIM's most prominent figures, enumerated AIM's goals in 1973 as focused on ending "economic racism" in Rapid City.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Russell Means, another prominent AIM leader, specified Rapid City as the battleground where AIM would seek to challenge the living conditions of American Indians in the border towns. Although Means was of Lakota descent, he had spent much of his life in urban centers away from the Pine Ridge Reservation.<sup>28</sup> It was not only AIM figureheads who noted that Pine Ridge was not on AIM's radar. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) covert surveillance by the Extremist Intelligence Section corroborated Banks' and Means' accounts in redacted, publically available field notes and memos via the Freedom of Information Act. In a Domestic Intelligence Division (DID) memo dating to February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1973, the FBI noted that AIM's next target after their takeover of the BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., was Rapid

City, South Dakota.<sup>29</sup> Even prior to this memo by the DID, the Special Agent in Charge (SAC) from Minneapolis sent a memo on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1973, to the Acting Director of the FBI stating that AIM was focusing on Rapid City and that “[redacted name] advised that the American Indian Movement (AIM) was not very active in the Pine Ridge area.”<sup>30</sup> This countered Dewing’s claim that AIM was primed and ready to challenge Wilson during the time of his impeachment proceedings.<sup>31</sup> Even contrary to the FBI’s knowledge that AIM’s focus lay elsewhere, Wilson and some of the BIA staff were actively promoting the notion that AIM was knocking on the doorsteps.

As Wilson began ratcheting up his insinuation of AIM and the traditionalist being one and the same, the traditionalists did not succeed in impeaching Chairman Wilson in November, 1972, and events would become more tempestuous after the failed impeachment. Wilson countered growing resentment of his chairmanship by establishing his own personal militia on the reservation, which became known as the “GOON squad.” The origins of the GOONs (ironically given the name “Guardians of the Oglala Nation” after the the term “goon” was used to describe them by traditionalists) is extremely murky. It has been speculated that they were funded by a misappropriation of US highway funds totaling \$65,000.<sup>32</sup> However, Wilson himself acknowledged that he received those funds directly from the BIA to establish a personal guard to combat AIM on the reservation.<sup>33</sup> Smith and Warrior’s analysis of the events point out the incongruence of Wilson’s claim that he needed substantial funds from the federal government for a personal police force to combat a threat when AIM’s presence was minimal and non-active on the reservation, which at the least the FBI had privately acknowledge by this point.<sup>34</sup> They also noted that during the siege, the GOON squad was supplied with fully automatic weapons, which could only have been supplied by federal agents.<sup>35</sup> This claim was corroborated in Churchill and Vander Wall’s account of the siege when federal authorities were found to be providing substantial armaments to Wilson’s GOONs.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in early January and late February of 1973, sixty-five members of the US Marshal Service’s Special Operations Group (SOG) and a significant number of FBI and BIA agents flooded the reservation to defend Wilson against the AIM threat that had previously not existed.<sup>37</sup> The Marshals and BIA police then fortified the OST headquarters in Pine Ridge, which was derivatively called “Fort Wilson” by the traditionalists.<sup>38</sup> These measures complicated the impeachment process, and they added fuel to the traditionalist narrative that Wilson was autocratic and dictatorial.

In the midst of the invasion of the US Marshals on the reservation, a group of Oglala Lakota traditionalists formed the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) in early February to protest the arrival of federal agents and to strengthen support for Wilson’s impeachment. Dewing, channeling a sentiment put forth by Wilson himself, described OSCRO as a shadow front or proxy for AIM that operated on the reservation after AIM was banned by Wilson and the OSTC.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Smith and Warrior claim that OSCRO had important connections to AIM even though they remained somewhat independent of AIM.<sup>40</sup> Reinhardt forcefully counters both assessments of OSCRO as he claims it was a local phenomenon that developed in reaction to Wilson’s cronyism and the invasion of the reservation by heavily armed

federal agents,<sup>41</sup> and Matthiessen seconds this sentiment that OSCRO formed from the cohort of traditionalists who opposed Wilson's housing project fiasco in 1972.<sup>42</sup> To a certain extent, the view of a strong OSCRO-AIM link was the dominant position among high ranking officials on the reservation, and this attitude was held by the BIA Reservation Superintendent, Stanley Layman, who in his personal journal noted, "One of the big points of contention at the meeting was the peaceful demonstration of the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, a group which, as far as I can tell, is sponsored by AIM."<sup>43</sup> However, one of OSCRO's founders, Geraldine Janis, claimed the organization was formed out of local interests to end Wilson's corruption, which was distinct from AIM's primary goals of focusing on border town racism in South Dakota and restoring political self-determination to all Indian nations.<sup>44</sup> In his autobiography, Means, AIM's National Coordinator at the time, argued that OSCRO was a separate organization from AIM and that Wilson had used the linkage between AIM and OSCRO as a means of rallying support against his political opponents on the reservation.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the previously noted FBI memo from January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1973, identifies a contingent of 30 to 40 "hard-core" members of what it refers to as the "AIMs Porcupine Chapter" (recall that Porcupine is a traditionalist stronghold on the reservation) along with 200 to 250 sympathizers in the Porcupine area that held pow wows and gave speeches, but it notes that the "chapter" or large number of sympathizers were not actively training militants or storing arms. Later in the report it informs the Acting Director of the FBI that this information about the "Porcupine chapter" would be passed along to Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota.<sup>46</sup> It is unknown if the 30-40 individuals identified by the FBI as AIM members around Porcupine refer to OSCRO or not, but contacting a military installation about AIM or OSCRO on the reservation represents a highly unusual action for the FBI given that the United States military is generally not involved in matters of civil law enforcement of which this would have been considered.

OSCRO's formation can be attributed to a number of local leaders who led the effort to develop an organized response to what they saw as Wilson's overreach as OSTC chairman. Prominent OSCRO leaders included Pedro Bissonette, Gladys Bissonette (Pedro's aunt and adoptive mother), Ellen Moves Camp, Vernon Long, Lou Bean, Agnes Lamont, and Geraldine Janis along with a number of the traditional chiefs, namely Fools Crow.<sup>47</sup> Many of the women from this list formed a protest outside the BIA building at Pine Ridge demanding that the US Marshals and BIA police needed to leave and respect the fact that neither set of federal agents had jurisdiction on the reservation.<sup>48</sup> In fact, it was the presence of those federal agents that is generally credited with the genesis of OSCRO.<sup>49</sup> Moves Camp summed up the protest's position this way: "We demanded the removal of Dick Wilson and Stanley Lyman, and the removal of the United States Marshals that were here, that were sent for by Mr. Lyman and Dick Wilson...Wilson told Stanley Lyman that he did not have to come over and talk to us – he didn't have to face nobody."<sup>50</sup> During the events that led up to the siege, BIA Superintendent Lyman often conflated leaders of OSCRO, such as Pedro Bissonette, as being members of AIM, which only reinforced his and other BIA officials' worries about an AIM takeover of the United States' reservations.<sup>51</sup> Even though Wilson and Lyman were apt to link the leadership of the two

resistance movements, the FBI had a slightly more nuanced view of leaders like Fools Crow. In a document sent to the FBI directors in San Francisco and Los Angeles on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976, the FBI noted that Fools Crow was a pacifist and not an AIM member nor an AIM sympathizer.<sup>52</sup> However, that memo was sent a full three years after the siege, and even though he was identified as not a militant, Fools Crow was being monitored by the FBI as if he was a member of AIM. This conflation of AIM and OSCRO by the United States federal government would continue during the course of and after the siege.

The separation of OSCRO from AIM is a critical distinction. If OSCRO was simply an AIM subsidiary, as Wilson, Lyman, the FBI, and Dewing claim, then the individuals in OSCRO ought to either fall in line with AIM's actions during the Wounded Knee siege or if disagreements do arise between the two organizations, then OSCRO should defer to AIM. However, if OSCRO shows autonomy and agency in the siege and if conflicts between AIM and OSCRO arise, then it implies that there exists a hierarchy of resistance to American imperialism during the Wounded Knee siege to which one form of resistance may be subordinated to the other, and, as a result of these conditions, a structure of subalternity can be substantiated. The following description of events will be used to determine if OSCRO and the traditionalists may be understood to exhibit a subaltern character in the common historical narrative of the Wounded Knee siege.

After the formation of OSCRO in early February of 1973, the traditionalists again sought to remove Wilson from the chairmanship of the OSTC, but Wilson would be more vociferous than before in denouncing those who sought his removal. The meeting minutes on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1973, indicate that Wilson showed a video recording of *Anarchy U.S.A.* by the John Birch Society, a film that linked the civil rights movement in the United States with communist conspiracies in an attempt to tie both OSCRO and AIM to communism.<sup>53</sup> Later, as the siege began, Wilson would once again make associations between AIM, OSCRO, and the Communist Party in a circulated letter sent around the reservation that read, "What has happened at Wounded Knee is all part of a long range plan of the Communist Party... So come on in and sign up, so we can get this show on the road."<sup>54</sup> However, as the impeachment hearing progressed, Wilson, in a highly unorthodox manner, assumed the role of presiding officer during his own impeachment trial, and after some maneuvering and politicking, he was reaffirmed as chairman by a vote of 14 to 0 with 1 absention.<sup>55</sup> Six weeks after the failed impeachment hearings an anonymous OSTC member answered "yes" to all the following questions in an interview with the American Indian Research Project at the University of South Dakota: "Is it your interpretation that this present chairman [Wilson] has taken all the power for himself? And is he refusing to go through the council with all of his decisions? So do you feel that this tribal executive board has a lot of authority... that [the members of the tribal executive board] sort of abuse the powers that they have?"<sup>56</sup> Alluding to similar backhand deals by Wilson, Gladys Bissonette noted in an interview that she believed members and witnesses were bought off to vote in certain ways in favor of Wilson, and after complaints about Wilson's conduct were raised by Pedro Bissonette and others, the BIA made no concerted effort to investigate the accusations.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Matthiessen

compared Wilson's autocratic use of the OSTC as akin to right-wing dictatorships the United States supported during the Cold War between his strong-arming of the OSTC and the liberal use of his GOON squad to quiet dissent.<sup>58</sup> Failing to garner Wilson's impeachment, OSCRO was left at the crossroads of an important decision.

In an effort to discuss what else could be done, the traditionalists gathered at a log community building called Calico Hall on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1973, where they began to discuss the next possible course of action.<sup>59</sup> The meeting consisted of more than 200 traditionalists associated with OSCRO, five traditional chiefs, including Fools Crow, and two members of AIM who were invited, namely Banks and Means.<sup>60</sup> Dewing claims that the meeting was preplanned by the upper echelon of AIM, such as members like Vernon Bellecourt who was in Rapid City at this time, and Dewing argues that the meeting at Calico Hall constituted a strategy session for AIM to begin the siege.<sup>61</sup> Contrary to this claim, all accounts from the participants note that the only AIM members were Banks and Means. Moves Camp, one of the main organizers of the event, stated in an interview that only two AIM members were present,<sup>62</sup> and Banks himself corroborates this claim in his autobiography.<sup>63</sup> However, Means claims that twenty-one AIM members were present with them at the meeting site, but it is unclear if they were in the meeting itself or merely in the vicinity.<sup>64</sup> The composition of the meeting is critical, given that it stands as strong evidence that either AIM was or was not heavily involved in the initiation of the Wounded Knee siege. However, it was Pedro Bissonette, who was one of the most prominent leaders of OSCRO, that nominated the town of Wounded Knee as a symbolic place to challenge the BIA and Wilson.<sup>65</sup> Even so, the meeting was dominated by many of the older traditionalist women that attended the meetings, such as Moves Camp and Gladys Bissonette, and it was they who challenged the meeting to take immediate action.<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that even though there is a great deal of disagreement among the participants of the meeting and subsequent historians as to who formed the meeting at Calico Hall, most of the first-hand accounts support the position that it consisted of mostly locals from the reservation and that AIM's presence at the meetings was minimal.

However, at this point there is an interesting divergence in the accounts of the decision to besiege Wounded Knee. It is generally understood that Fools Crow gave the final directive, as the most senior chief of the Oglala Lakota, to go to Wounded Knee and make a stand against Wilson.<sup>67</sup> One of the AIM members present at Calico Hall, Banks, wrote in his autobiography that Fools Crow said, "Then we'll go to Wounded Knee. The AIM warriors will lead us."<sup>68</sup> Means, another prominent AIM member cites Fools Crow in this way: "Go to Wounded Knee. There you'll be protected."<sup>69</sup> Moves Camp renders Fools Crow's imperative in this manner: "Go ahead and do it, go to Wounded Knee. You can't get in the BIA offices and the Tribal offices, so take your brothers from the American Indian Movement and go to Wounded Knee."<sup>70</sup> Buried within the subtle distinctions of each account lies a differing perspective on agency. Moves Camp's account has Fools Crow informing OSCRO and the traditionalists that they need "take" their allies from AIM to Wounded Knee, while Banks's description has Fools Crow saying that AIM will "lead" the way. Interestingly, Means, who was both AIM and a local traditionalist,

generalizes Fools Crow's statement to leave a distinction between OSCRO and AIM. These differing accounts from important members of each faction present at Calico Hall denote how the interests of each faction bifurcated into distinct sentiments about who had agency in initiating the siege.

Likewise, the each side's view of what would happen after they secure the town of Wounded Knee differed in critical ways. Moves Camp stated that her original expectations had the siege being quick, leading to changes in the OSTC.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, Banks has a much more active role for AIM and casts the conflict as within AIM's goals as an organization, namely the focus on a national-scale resistance to American imperialism.<sup>72</sup> And still, Means portrays the AIM contingent at Wounded Knee during the first few days as being relatively minor compared to the local Oglalas who were involved in the siege.<sup>72</sup> The central issue of these differences is one of agency. Did OSCRO and local interests drive the early stages of the siege or was it AIM that held the reins only enlisting local support? The initial demands from Wounded Knee have been discussed, but the signatures on the document are telling. It includes three members from OSCRO, including Vernon Long and Pedro Bissonette, one signature from AIM, namely Russell Means, and eight signatures from the traditional chiefs, including Fools Crow.<sup>73</sup> AIM had not been shy in the past about putting itself in the spotlight of events, but here they are curiously underrepresented as a party making in the formal demands of the siege. These signatures point to the interpretation that OSCRO and the traditionalists held primary agency during the beginning of the 1973 siege with AIM acting in a secondary role.

The federal government's initial response to the siege indicates that it viewed the siege to be much more than a civil disturbance. The inordinate amount of arms and manpower that the BIA and US Marshals had placed in the Pine Ridge Reservation would have been overkill if the siege had only been perceived by the federal government as concerning a local resistance group with local demands and local solutions. During the siege, the federal agents would bring armored personnel carriers (APCs), use F-4 Phantom jets for aerial surveillance, and employ FBI sharpshooters equipped with .50 caliber rifles.<sup>74</sup> However, if the federal agents felt that the threat was tied to a long-running feud with radical elements of AIM, then the level of armaments would at least seem more plausible. This reinforces the notion that the Wounded Knee siege ought to be considered within the purview of an imperial history given that the federal response was anything but ordinary in terms of civil conflict; rather, the response seems to be much more similar to how the federal government might respond to an international disturbance.

This speculation ties in with the presentation of the siege in the national and international media. For the most part, AIM leaders, such as Banks and Means, were seen as the faces of the siege.<sup>75</sup> In fact, both Means and Banks praised Pedro Bissonette's role in the siege, but his quiet demeanor and insistence on waiting for feedback from the traditional medicine men led to his role being under-presented in the national media.<sup>76</sup> This paper will not focus a great deal of effort outlining representations of the siege in the media, but it is important to note that the federal agents, Wilson and his GOON squad, and AIM would benefit from the media covering AIM. Only OSCRO and the local traditionalists would not benefit from the lack of coverage. This is

because Wilson and the federal government would benefit through the siege being seen as the work of radical militants, thereby discrediting what was soon becoming a very credible threat to the United States' subjugation of American Indian nations. However, AIM benefits from this same perspective. If AIM is seen by the national and international public as leading the charge against the American government, then it raises AIM's profile as an institution. OSCRO, on the other hand, risks being discredited as "radical" and "militant" and not having its real and immediate concerns about the OSTC and the BIA overshadowed by AIM's demands. As such, there exists differential costs and benefits to each faction present at the siege in terms of how the siege will be seen by the nation and the world.

To consider an important event during the middle of the siege and who held agency at that juncture, it is critical to consider who led negotiations as the siege continued well into March and April of 1973. While both sides of the siege would negotiate peace and fire barrages of bullets in spurts throughout the remainder of the siege, one key event along the way was the establishment of the Independent Oglala Nation (ION) by the protesters as a separate political entity from the OSTC. Now, it is important to determine how and why ION was established through the eyes of critical participants in that process. Means presents the genesis of ION as an event led by the traditionalists who wanted to revert back to the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and negotiate with the United States government nation-to-nation as they had done before.<sup>77</sup> Banks, too, agreed that only local individuals should be involved in cease-fire agreements, as the future of an ION was theirs to determine for themselves.<sup>78</sup> Gladys Bissonette, when discussing her thoughts on Oglala sovereignty, said, "We want an independent Oglala Sioux nation. We don't want no part of the Government, Tribal or BIA. We have had enough of that. They don't allow us our rights. We want our old 1868 Treaty back."<sup>79</sup> Moves Camp, in the same interview, then makes a strong remark regarding AIM's role in the creation of ION: "No, it wasn't the American Indian Movement people that done that. It was the people here on the reservation that done it."<sup>80</sup> This is a crucial point: if AIM had been the primary instigator and leader of the siege, it would undermine the calls for independence that ION had enunciated for itself. To local leaders like Moves Camp and Gladys Bissonette, it was critical that ION be noticed as springing from local Oglala Sioux desires for political sovereignty. The establishment of ION implies that during the middle of the siege, the interests of the local traditionalists held a place of primacy with regards to AIM's interests at the siege, albeit these interests were largely concurrent with each other.

However, tensions between hard-core AIM members and local traditionalists would come to a head after the arrest of Pedro Bissonette as part of a ceasefire agreement and immediately after the death of Buddy Lamont.<sup>81</sup> His immediate family, Agnes, his mother, and Darlene, his sister, who were both members of OSCRO, pleaded with Banks to allow for a wake for Buddy's funeral, but Banks was highly suspicious of making an agreement with the federal agents and wanted to keep fighting. Their conversation went as follows:

Banks: One of the dirtiest low-down tricks that a person could ever pull! They're [federal agents] going to use the body of Buddy Lamont-

Darlene: No Dennis – now before you go on, Mom had understood somebody to say that there would be like a cease-fire or agreement. The way Castlemen [FBI agent] understood it, there would be negotiations.

[Darlene then informs Banks that she wants him to not lay down his life so Indian peoples will have leaders in the future]

Darlene: We want you please to try and come to some kind of peaceful end.

Agnes: I been praying and praying every day for you people. That God will have mercy on us, and give you our demands. Our treaty. We will win out. It's coming. All I want to ask is that we have a wake in Porcupine one night, and one night here. And bring food in.

Darlene: And I told him this [wake ceremony] isn't something we made up off the top of our heads – this has been going on for hundreds of years.

Agnes: It's our tradition.

Banks: I tried to say earlier Frizzell [FBI special agent in charge] is a low-down human being. He's using Buddy's death, now, as a way to end the confrontation.<sup>82</sup>

Means noted that it was Buddy's death that prompted Fools Crow to seek a peace agreement and end the siege.<sup>83</sup> After the meeting with Agnes and Darlene Lamont, Banks went with other representatives of ION to meet with SAC Frizzell. In his statement, Banks said, "With the advice of the chiefs and after consulting with Mrs. Lamont, we're agreed that the 1868 Treaty must be the continuing foundation for all discussions... There will be an immediate pull-back of arms when this is guaranteed."<sup>84</sup> Other records regarding the end of the siege likewise point to Buddy Lamont's death as being an important precipitating factor in ending the siege. In an FBI memo to the Acting Directors in Denver, Minneapolis, and Oklahoma City on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1973, the Omaha Acting Director noted that a tape recording of AIM member Carter Camp, who had been in charge of security at the Wounded Knee siege for the protestors, had been confiscated from Alonzo Victor King in Lincoln, Nebraska, during a police search of his vehicle. In Camp's statement to other AIM members, he said that morale had been low after the death of Buddy Lamont at the siege, but that even though he wished to continue the fight, he could not go against the wishes and desires of the local protestors.<sup>85</sup> For their part, Banks and Camp refused to sign the final peace agreement ending the siege even as the local traditionalist chose to do so, as to not have their names associated with a document of surrender.<sup>86</sup> Even as the siege wound down, an underground member of the media present at Wounded Knee noted that the AIM leadership was becoming less visible as the siege continued into April of 1973.<sup>87</sup> The events surrounding and following Buddy Lamont's death indicate that the local traditionalists were still ultimately the ones in control of the course of the siege and its fate.

The subsequent events after the siege are also telling in regards to how Wounded Knee was categorically different than other types of domestic disturbances within the United States. After the fallout settled down, the United States federal officials sent to negotiate treaty rights with ION first denied their ability to negotiate with ION and secondly did not show up to future meetings after they indicated they would be attending future negotiations.<sup>88</sup> While the United States federal government has never been formally implicated in increasing funds to Wilson's

GOON squads as they unleashed a “reign of terror” upon the Pine Ridge Reservation, they failed to systematically prosecute or investigate the deaths of Oglala Sioux traditionalists even though the FBI’s presence on the reservation only increased in the following years.<sup>89</sup> Churchill and Vander Wall noted that BIA support of the GOONs through non-official venues amounted to the eerily similar use of “death squads” in Latin America to quell and suppress leftist militants.<sup>90</sup> Many OSCRO/ION members would be murdered or assassinated in a variety of suspicious ways of which the most prominent case was the death of Pedro Bissonette. After he was arrested in April of 1973, he made an agreement with the FBI to testify against other AIM members in a trial; however, once he began his testimony, he refused to “lie” against his fellow protesters. Later that year in October, he claimed he had documentation that linked the FBI, the GOONs, and Wilson, but he got into a fist fight with an alleged GOON in White Clay, Nebraska, leading to his declared status as a fugitive on Pine Ridge. He was shot by a member of the GOON squad at point-blank range with a 12 gauge shotgun where he was left to bleed for an hour before being taken to a hospital.<sup>91</sup> While the GOONs ran rampant on the reservation, Wilson “won” the 1974 election for tribal chairman against Means, but a U.S. Civil Rights Commission investigation found “widespread irregularities took place before, during and after the election, and concludes that the results of the election are therefor[e] invalid.”<sup>92</sup> As the FBI increased its efforts to combat AIM by bankrupting it in lengthy and costly legal altercations, the FBI infiltrated AIM with agents and “black-jacketers” to cause dissent within the organization and procure covert intelligence on AIM’s activities.<sup>93</sup> With AIM diminished and the remnants of OSCRO being purged, this particular chapter in the Indian Wars would come to a close.

Given the evidence presented here, this paper contends that there was a separation, a divergence of interests between factions involved in the siege in the form of a national, Pan-American Indian faction, AIM and a Lakota traditionalist faction local to the Pine Ridge Reservation, OSCRO/ION. These segmented forms of American Indian resistance were constituted in relations of power, and the framework of that power relationship manifested itself in the form of a hierarchy within the resistance movement. The further claim of this paper was that the local traditionalists held primary agency in initiating the siege, leading the siege, and ending the siege with AIM acting in a mostly supportive role. Tensions and conflicts existed between AIM and the Oglala Sioux traditionalists, but the interests of the local faction was generally maintained over the interests of AIM at critical junctures during the siege. However, given this assertion that it was the local traditionalists on the reservation that directed and initiated one of the most prominent acts of resistance to American imperialism, it is cogent that the FBI, BIA, and their proxies would essentialize that resistance to be as radical and militant as possible. Thus, the narrative that AIM led the siege fuels the notion that the siege was not representative of the plight of American Indian because it was led by extremists, as a way of discrediting the siege itself. For these reasons, the existence of subaltern forms of resistance can be said to be an important feature of the Wounded Knee siege.

### ENDNOTES

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