

The Native American Movement

In the 1950s, Native Americans struggled with the government's policy of moving them off reservations and into cities where they might assimilate into mainstream America. Not only did they face the loss of land; many of the uprooted Indians often had difficulties adjusting to urban life. In 1961 when the policy was discontinued, the United States Commission on Civil Rights noted that for Indians, "poverty and deprivation are common."

In the 1960s and 1970s, watching both the development of Third World nationalism and the progress of the civil rights movement, Native Americans became more aggressive in pressing for their own rights. A new generation of leaders went to court to protect what was left of tribal lands or to recover that which had been taken, often illegally, in previous times. In state after state, they challenged treaty violations, and in 1967 won the first of many victories guaranteeing long-abused land and water rights. The American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, helped channel government funds to Indian-controlled organizations and assisted neglected Indians in the cities.

Confrontations became common. In 1969 a landing party of 78 Native Americans seized Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay and held it until federal officials removed them in 1971. In 1973 AIM took over the South Dakota village of Wounded Knee, where soldiers in the late 19th century had massacred a Sioux encampment. Militants hoped to dramatize miserable conditions in the reservation surrounding the town, where half of the families were on welfare and alcoholism was widespread. The episode ended, after one Indian was killed and another wounded, with a government agreement to re-examine treaty rights, although little was subsequently done.

Still, Indian activism brought results. Other Americans became more aware of Native American needs. Officials in all branches of government had to respond to pressure for equal treatment that was long overdue. The Senate's first Native American member, Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, was elected in 1992.