

# Islands–Alcatraz Occupation.

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## Instructions for Teachers

This lesson focuses on the *Islands* section of the exhibition by examining the Indian occupation of Alcatraz that occurred from 1969-1971. In doing so, it connects to a major point of the exhibit, the isolation of the islands of the Bay, but it also illustrates an important event in American history. Too often the study of Indians ends with Wounded Knee in 1890, if not earlier. This lesson attempts to bring the study of Native American history into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, because the lesson is short, it does not give a complete narrative. It will be important for teachers to point out that after nineteen months the Indians who were left on Alcatraz were taken off the island. Even though the demands of the Indians were not met, many felt the occupation was successful. To quote Dr. Troy Jonson from *The Alcatraz Indian Occupation*,

*The success or failure of the occupation should not be judged by whether the demands of the occupiers were realized. The underlying goals of the Indians on Alcatraz were to awaken the American public to the reality of the plight of the first Americans and to assert the need for Indian self-determination. As a result of the occupation, either directly or indirectly, the official government policy of termination of Indian tribes was ended and a policy of Indian self-determination because the official US government policy.*

This lesson is divided into five parts: the first four are to be completed before your visit to the museum. The fifth part is to be done as follow up following your visit.

### **Part One:**

Gives a brief background on the US Government policies of termination and relocation for Native Americans.

### **Part Two:**

Gives some statistical information about Indians and asks students to answer questions and reach some possible conclusions about what the statistics might mean. They are asked to write a paragraph on whether they believe the statistics show that Indians will protest government policies. The answer could be either way because the statistics show that while conditions were miserable for Indians, and worse for them than for the rest of the population, their conditions were improving over time. The point of the exercise is to have students use the statistics to make an argument in a sophisticated manner. There is no right or wrong answer.

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### Part Three:

Asks students to read a primary source (a proclamation issued by Indians on Alcatraz Island) and to answer questions about it.

### Part Four:

Students are asked to speculate about the advantages and disadvantages that would come from a decision to occupy the island of Alcatraz. Then they are to compare their speculations with excerpts that are provided.

Some possible advantages students might list could include:

- Alcatraz, as a former prison, would be an important symbolic gesture
- While isolated, it was close to a city that might be supportive
- The isolation would help the Indians have their own community
- The drama of taking over an island could draw media support.

Some disadvantages could include:

- The lack of resources, especially fresh water
- The cold weather
- The isolation might cause people to turn on each other.

## Museum Visit

Lead students to the *Islands* portion of the exhibition and have them closely examine the displays and images. Have them compare and contrast the Alcatraz occupation with the other stories mentioned in the Islands section. Ask them to consider in what ways the exhibit creates a sense of isolations and removal.

## After the Visit

### Part Five:

After discussing what the students saw and experienced in the exhibition, discuss how the themes of isolation and removal from the rest of society played out in the story of the Indian occupation of Alcatraz. Have them write a paragraph describing in what way this experience was both similar and different from other islands that are mentioned in the exhibit?

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## Information/worksheet for Students

What were the historical conditions that caused Native Americans want to take over Alcatraz Island?

### **Part One–Background Information:**

For many years the U.S. government, after taking over Native American lands, forced Indians to live on reservations. In the 1950s the government decided on two new policies. One was called “Termination”. The goal of this policy was to assimilate Native Americans into the larger society by breaking up tribal groups. Along with this was a policy called “Relocation”. Under this policy, Indians were encouraged to move away from reservation and to large urban areas to seek jobs. The government offered job training and other services meant to help ease the transition to city life. Almost 11,000 decided to take this offer in part because unemployment was high on the reservations.

One of the unintended side effects of this move to the city was to bring people of different tribes together. In the reservations people mostly met with others of the same tribe. However, in the city many Indians found that they had much in common, and there was general agreement among people of different tribes that the government had not lived up to its promises.

As Larry Solomon from San Francisco State University writes, *“There was much bitterness in the Bay Area about the effects of the relocation program. Though they had been promised jobs, housing, medical care and vocational training, Indians of all backgrounds found themselves dumped into poor neighborhoods with nothing more than a little cash. Anger was mounting and people began talking about doing something...”*

**Part Two–Statistical Chart:**

Read the chart in Appendix I and answer the following questions:

<b>Infant mortality</b>	
In which year was the infant death rate for Indians the highest?	
In which year was the infant death rate for Indians the lowest?	
When the infant death rate was at its lowest for Indians, was it more or less than other groups?	
<b>Unemployment</b>	
In 1967 what percentage of Indians were unemployed?	
What percentage of all males were unemployed at the same time?	
Write two questions you have about the unemployment rates?	
<b>Access to medical care</b>	
In 1955 how many Indian people did each pharmacist see?	
What was the number of Indian people a pharmacist saw in 1966?	
In the general population, a pharmacist would see how many people?	

Write a short paragraph in the space below either agreeing or disagreeing with the following statement. Use at least 4 pieces of evidence from the charts and the other statistical information in your answer.

**Statement:** It was clear that conditions affecting Indians was going to cause them to protest government policies.

**Part Three:**

Read the proclamation in Appendix II and answer the following questions.

On November 20, 1969 approximately 50 Native Americans individuals occupied Alcatraz Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. The island had been a prison, but several years before the government had closed the prison and the island was not being used.

Upon landing on the island the occupiers issued a proclamation explaining why they were taking it over and what they wanted the government to do. Read the proclamation and answer the following questions.

1. Throughout the first part of the proclamation the tone is a mix of pride, sarcasm, and determination. Pick out three excerpts from the Proclamation to fill in the chart below.

Excerpt (Quote a few words or a line)	Tone	Explain how you think this excerpt demonstrates this tone
In which year was the infant death rate for Indians the highest?		
In which year was the infant death rate for Indians the lowest?		
When the infant death rate was at it's lowest for Indians, was it more or less than other groups?		

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2. Of the five plans that the Indians had to develop the Island, which two do you feel would be the most important? Explain why.

### Part Four—Advantages and Disadvantages:

Remember that Alcatraz was an uninhabited island in the middle of San Francisco Bay when the Indians occupied it. Generate two lists: on the first, list possible advantages for using Alcatraz; on the second, list possible disadvantages. Read some of the excerpts below to see if some of the advantages and disadvantages you anticipated actually happened.

#### Excerpt 1

One of the biggest problems was getting supplies to feed and clothe the inhabitants and otherwise make life bearable on the rocky freezing cold island. Adam Fortunate Eagle, then Adam Nordwall writes about the support network in his book, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!: “Organizing on the supply line meant securing donations, equipment, boat, transportation and health care. Hundreds in the Bay Area and beyond donated their time, energy and resources.”*

—From *Roots of Justice: Stories of Organizing in Communities of Color*, Larry R. Solomon, 1998

#### Excerpt 2

The government shut off all electrical power, and removed the water barge which had provided fresh water to the occupiers. Three days following the removal of the water barge, a fire broke out on the island. Several historic buildings were destroyed.

—Dr. Troy Johnson, *The Alcatraz Indian Occupation*

#### Excerpt 3

The daily reports from the government caretaker on the island as well as testimony from the remaining original occupiers complain of the open use of drugs, fighting over authority, and general disarray of the leadership.

—Dr. Troy Johnson, *The Alcatraz Indian Occupation*

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**Excerpt 4**

It has been nearly three weeks since a small group of Indians sailed across San Francisco Bay in the middle of the night and took control of Alcatraz...since then, their numbers have swelled, and now it is believed that there are as many as a thousand Indians on the island...

—*New York Times*, December 12, 1969

**Excerpt 5**

The Indians took possession of the island on November 14...In the ensuing months the number of Indians on the island climbed to nearly a thousand. But as the winter rains came, they dwindled to about a hundred.

—*New York Times*, April 9, 1970

**Excerpt 6**

The Indians have been without water on Alcatraz since the Government removed a water barge nearly two months ago...Mr. Hannon said the government had no authority to return water to the island for the Indians. John Trudell, a member of the Island's sever member ruling council, said water was being rationed. That the only water being brought onto the island came in one and five gallon containers across from San Francisco as boats were made available...

—*New York Times*, August 16, 1970

**Advantages****Disadvantages**

## Appendix I-Statistical Charts

**Infant Death Rates (per 1,000 live births): Indians and All Races, Selected Years, 1955–1967**

Year	Indian	All Races
1955	61	26.4
1959	50	26.4
1963	40	25.2
1967	30	22.4

Source: U.S. Public Health Service, “Indian Health Trends and Service,” 1969 ed., pp 8-32

**Unemployment Rates: Indian, Nonwhite, and All Males, Selected Years, 1960–1967 (in percent)**

Year	All Indians	Non-Reservation Indians	On-Reservation Indians	Non-whites	All Males
1960	38.2	21.1	51.3	10.7	5.4
1961	na	na	49.5	12.8	6.4
1962	na	na	43.4	10.9	5.2
1965	na	na	41.9	7.4	4.0
1966	na	na	41.9	6.3	3.2
1967	na	na	37.3	6.0	3.1

Source: *Manpower report of the President*, 1968, p. 237. na–Not available

**Number of Persons Served by Each Physician, Dentist, Public Health Nurse, and Pharmacist, 1955, 1962, 1966**

Profession	Indian Health Program 1955	Indian Health Program 1962	Indian Health Program 1966	General Population 1962
Physician	2,200	1,460	1,220	840
Dentist	7,000	4,600	3,670	1,800
Public Health Nurse	4,000	3,500	3,300	2,500
Pharmacist	51,400	6,400	5,000	1,500

Sources: *A Review of Indian Health Program*, House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, 1963.  
 Public Health Service, *Illness Among Indians*, 1966.

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## Appendix II—Proclamation

### **Indians of All Nations: The Alcatraz Proclamation to the Great White Father and his People, 1969**

Fellow citizens, we are asking you to join with us in our attempt to better the lives of all Indian people.

We are on Alcatraz Island to make known to the world that we have a right to use our land for our own benefit.

In a proclamation of November 20, 1969, we told the government of the United States that we are here “to create a meaningful use for our Great Spirit’s Land.”

We, the native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery.

We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man’s purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that \$24 in trade goods for these 16 acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of \$1.24 per acres is greater than the \$0.47 per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their lands.

We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of the land for their own to be held in trust...by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs...in perpetuity—for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea. We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men.

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man’s own standards. By this, we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations in that:

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1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
  2. It has no fresh running water.
  3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
  4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
  5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
  6. There are no health-care facilities.
  7. The soil is rocky and non-productive, and the land does not support game.
  8. There are no educational facilities.
  9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
  10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

What use will we make of this land?

Since the San Francisco Indian Center burned down, there is no place for Indians to assemble and carry on tribal life here in the white man's city. Therefore, we plan to develop on this island several Indian institutions:

1. A Center for Native American Studies will be developed which will educate them to the skills and knowledge relevant to improve the lives and spirits of all Indian peoples. Attached to this center will be travelling universities, managed by Indians, which will go to the Indian Reservations, learning those necessary and relevant materials now about.
2. An American Indian Spiritual Center, which will practice our ancient tribal religious and sacred healing ceremonies. Our cultural arts will be featured and our young people trained in music, dance, and healing rituals.
3. An Indian Center of Ecology, which will train and support our young people in scientific research and practice to restore our lands and waters to their pure and natural state. We will work to de-pollute the air and waters of the Bay Area. We will seek to restore fish and animal life to the area and to revitalize sea-life which has been threatened by the white man's way. We will set up facilities to desalt sea water for human benefit.

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4. A Great Indian Training School will be developed to teach our people how to make a living in the world, improve our standard of living, and to end hunger and unemployment among all our people. This training school will include a center for Indian arts and crafts, and an Indian restaurant serving native foods, which will restore Indian culinary arts. This center will display Indian arts and offer Indian foods to the public, so that all may know of the beauty and spirit of the traditional Indian ways. This center will display Indian arts and offer Indian foods to the public, so that all may know of the beauty and spirit of the traditional Indian ways.

5. Some of the present buildings will be taken over to develop an American Indian Museum which will depict our native food and other cultural contributions we have given to the world. Another part of the museum will present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation (as symbolized by old tin cans, barbed wire, rubber tires, plastic containers, etc.). Part of the museum will remain a dungeon to symbolize both those Indian captives who were incarcerated for challenging white authority and those who were imprisoned on reservations. The museum will show the noble and tragic events of Indian history, including the broken treaties, the documentary of the Trail of Tears, the Massacre of Wounded Knee, as well as the victory over Yellow-Hair Custer and his army.

In the name of all Indians, therefore, we reclaim this island for our Indian nations, for all these reasons. We feel this claim is just and proper, and that this land should rightfully be granted to us for as long as the rivers run and the sun shall shine.

We hold the rock!

Source: [http://arts-sciences.und.edu/native-media-center/\\_files/docs/1950-1970/1969alcatrazproclamation.pdf](http://arts-sciences.und.edu/native-media-center/_files/docs/1950-1970/1969alcatrazproclamation.pdf)