

## Indians

# A Long List of Grievances

WASHINGTON—Few observers of Indian life were surprised last week when the "Trail of Broken Treaties," a cross-country caravan of Indian activists, led straight to this city. Tribal grievances have been blossoming here much longer than the cherry trees—since 1792, in fact, when the Seneca Chief Red Jacket journeyed to Washington to lecture the Senate on the importance of keeping its promises.

What startled some, however, was the fury of the protest, its tone of noisy desperation. "We have now declared war on the United States of America—seek your stations," Vernon Bellecourt, one of the leaders, told protesters who had barricaded themselves inside the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) Building.

The week-long drama began on Nov. 2 when a band of 500 Indians, including women and two dozen children, took over the building. Subsisting on food and other supplies brought into the building by sympathizers, the Indians set about fashioning makeshift tomahawks and clubs from legs of tables and chairs and vowed to resist any effort to oust them by force.

Last Wednesday they walked out voluntarily, having reached agreement with White House aides that a study of their problems would be made. They also carried with them a number of documents from Government files that, they declared, contained "highly incriminating" evidence of exploitation of Indians by present and past members of Congress. Interior Department officials said they had also carried out "priceless Indian art and artifacts" and that the building had been heavily damaged.

The protest was organized by the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.), a young activist group with a taste for high drama. The caravan set out weeks ago from Seattle, where much of the new militancy is centered, and picked up members along the way.

They carried a list of 20 demands dealing with such matters as health, education, housing, water rights and treaty provisions.

Official Washington response to the demonstration: The protesters, said Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton, were a "splinter group of militants . . . not supported by a majority of reservation Indians."

A veteran Indian spokesman offered a different view: "We may disagree with some of their tactics," he said, "but there probably isn't a single Indian organization anywhere that would disagree with those 20 points. A lot of Indians out there are watching the protest and saying 'right on!'"

It could fairly be said that the Indians were engaged in an old and honorable enterprise: They were taking over territory which they claimed had



### THE PLIGHT OF THE INDIAN

	American Indian	U.S.
Suicides (1970)	32.0 per 100,000	16.0 per 100,000
Life expectancy (1970)	47 years	70.8 years
Unemployment rate (1972)	45% estimated	5.8%
Median family income (1971)	\$4,000	\$9,867
Infant mortality (1970)	30.9 per 1,000 live births	21.8 per 1,000 live births
Per cent entering college (1971)	18%	50%

Chie Nishlo/Nancy Palmer  
 An Indian activist—a member of the band that took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs building to dramatize Indian grievances. "The new mood stems from more than broken treaties."

been theirs all along. Three years ago, and for similar reasons, they had occupied Alcatraz, and more recently they had squatted atop the head of Teddy Roosevelt on Mount Rushmore.

But Indian anger has long focused on the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington. One of the leaders of last week's demonstration told Bureau officials: "You don't know anything about Indian affairs. You should turn the Bureau over to us."

Actually, the Bureau has been gradually "going Indian" ever since John Collier reorganized it during New Deal days. Many of its top officials now, including Commissioner Louis R. Bruce, are Indians. Yet the Bureau's essential outlook, most Indians believe, remains white and paternalistic. On nearly all reservations, where three-fourths of the nation's one million Indians reside, its word is still law, despite recent gains in tribal autonomy.

All of which points up the Indian's peculiar position in America. Though a fully qualified citizen with full voting rights, he retains strong allegiances to his tribe; and when he calls for self-determination, as the protesters did, he is thinking not so much of individual rights as he is of tribal sovereignty.

Like a spider in a web, he and his tribe live in the center of an intricate network of treaties and agreements with the rest of America, many of them old and all but forgotten, some only now being brought to light. Worst, wherever he turns he finds these treaties in tatters: state governments seize his land; developers drain his lakes; tourists and business ignore his fishing rights. In the end he declares war on the B.I.A.—not because it is the only source of his miseries (it isn't) but because it is there.

The new mood stems from more than broken treaties. Much of it is the natural consequence of what Indians perceive to be their second-class status. "We're tired of being kicked around," said a Sioux Indian leader. Thanks to nearly a decade of Federal anti-poverty education, the Indian now knows that he and his brothers are rated "the poorest of the poor." The accompanying table gives some indication of the Indian's problems.

Ironically, much of the Indian's suf-

fering occurs within a pervasive "welfare" setting: On every reservation the Public Health Service provides free medical service; the Department of Agriculture supplies commodity foods; and the B.I.A. offers a variety of welfare-oriented services. But jobs are scarce and morale remains low. Like the Southern blacks, many Indians have been drifting off the land and into the city in search of jobs and housing. There they suffer from alienation, fewer social services and, in many cases, open racial hostility.

They have therefore begun to adopt the same tactics of pride and protest which they saw blacks use successfully in the nineteen-sixties. Young Indian activists have been heard to call their elders "Uncle Tomahawks," or to label an Indian bureaucrat, who may have neglected his origins, "an apple"—red

on the outside, white on the inside.

Increasingly now, Indians are seeking redress of their grievances in the courts. And much of the friendly white money is being channeled into this area. The Ford Foundation, for example, recently gave \$1.2-million to the Native American Rights Fund, a legal services group, "in the belief that the law can be made to . . . help fulfill the rights of Indian people."

The question raised by the "Trail of Broken Treaties" protest is whether Indians—by reputation a patient race—will be content to wait while the wheels of justice slowly turn; or will they, as they did last week, rush to the barricades?

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