

# Under siege, AIM finds its spiritual roots

by Andrew Ross and Stephen Most

(PNS) - Three years after the internationally publicized Occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the American Indian Movement (AIM) which led the uprising appears, on the surface, to be a shambles.

The AIM leadership has been imprisoned or chased underground and the organization's time and energy has been tied up in over 150 separate court cases. Dennis Banks and Russell Means, the prime movers of the organization, are reported to be bitterly divided over their future roles, and Means was recently the target of an assassination attempt, allegedly carried out by members of a rival AIM faction.

In addition, AIM's legal offense/defense office has been unable to generate sufficient political or financial support for its various legal battles. And even AIM spokespeople quietly acknowledge that its national office is barely functioning.

All this, Indian activists claim, points to the success of an ambitious FBI effort to disrupt and dismantle the militant Indian movement by a combination of harassment, infiltration and division of leadership - tactics strikingly similar to the controversial COINTELPRO techniques with which federal agents struck at militant Black organizations during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But given the continuing series of critical AIM setbacks, a curious phenomenon remains: what began as a small band of urban, politically-minded reformers has been transformed into a pervasive, decentralized spiritual movement woven into the fabric of traditional Indian culture. As such, AIM has ignited what one Indian leader calls "the spiritual rebirth of our nation."

### The Turning Point

Since its founding in 1968 as an urban organization for unemployed Indians who had come to cities through the federal relocation program, AIM has gone through various transformations.

Its early successes were chiefly confined to the cities. In St. Paul AIM led a drive to persuade big industries to employ Indians. In Minneapolis it worked with the Office of Economic Opportunity to channel funds into native peoples' organizations.

The Minneapolis AIM patrol followed police who were arresting and beating Indians, then appeared in courts as witnesses to prove a pattern of discrimination.

Within a year, arrest rates dropped sharply.

AIM work in Minneapolis also led to the building of an Indian Center and the first urban Indian housing project with 230 homes.

These efforts made AIM known as the most effective Indian activist group, and branches soon sprang up in cities with native populations throughout the country.

But the critical turning point in the movement occurred when leaders visited medicine man Leonard Crow Dog on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. Crow Dog advised them that to be a true Indian organization they needed to return to the spiritual heart of traditional Indian culture - a spark still preserved by the traditional and holy people.

Said one leader, "That is actually when the American Indian Movement was born."

### The Sacred Hoop

Soon after, AIM united with traditional Sioux and members of the Oglala Civil Rights Commission to take a stand at Wounded Knee. They chose the site of the 1890 massacre to protest unpunished killings of Indians and the one-man rule of the tribal president, Richard Wilson, because, as Wallace Black Elk said:

"The hoop, the sacred hoop was broken here at Wounded Knee, and it will come back again. The stake here that represents the tree of life, the tree will bloom, it will flower again, and all the people will rejoin and come back to the sacred road, the red road."

During and after the Wounded Knee occupation, AIM groups formed spontaneously on reservations throughout the U.S. AIM-inspired actions by Navajo, Menominee and other groups occurred independently of the central hierarchy, under local leadership.

"That's the best thing about the movement," says Dennis Banks today. "The rank and file are taking steps on their own, without waiting for orders from their leaders."

### Assault on Leadership

Most of the top leaders are currently embroiled in legal battles with state and federal authorities. Russell Means, a major figure in the Wounded Knee occupation, faces a two-to-ten year jail sentence on a riot conviction.

Leonard Crow Dog, now the movement's "spiritual leader," was recently released from jail pending an appeal of

an assault conviction. AIM co-founder Dennis Banks is fighting extradition to South Dakota, where, he insists, he will be killed by authorities if he is forced to return.

Two AIM members have just gone on trial in Cedar Falls, Iowa, for the murder of two FBI agents last summer. And two others have been in jail without trial since 1974 in Ventura, California, accused of murdering a taxi driver.

For months following the murder of two FBI agents and an Indian at Oglala, South Dakota, on June 26, 1975, the FBI virtually occupied the Pine Ridge reservation with 150 agents - the heaviest concentration of federal police, per capita, in the country.

Four Indians were eventually charged with the agents' deaths. All but one, Leonard Peltier, who is to be extradited from Canada, are now on trial.

According to the FBI, Peltier was traveling with Dennis Banks, his wife Kamook, and three others in November of last year when Oregon police stopped them and charged them with carrying dynamite. Banks and Peltier escaped, but Kamook and the others were arrested.

One of the others, Annie Aquash, slipped away from custody following her transfer to South Dakota. Her battered body was later found in Wanblee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, after an autopsy the FBI announced her dead from exposure. But a second autopsy requested by her family found a bullet hole in the back of her head.

In the trial of the remaining two defendants, a key prosecution witness has withdrawn much of his testimony after admitting he was secretly coached by government prosecutors on what to say in court.

### A different AIM

Despite the arrests, convictions and deaths, AIM supporters insist that the movement continues to flourish. They point with pride to its involvement with the recent International Treaty Conference, which drew thousands of Native Americans as well as representatives of revolutionary groups from Rhodesia, the Middle East and Puerto Rico. There are also ongoing projects such as AIM "survival schools" for Indian children, two of which recently received \$200,000 government grants.

"AIM will be the liberation organization of our people for the next 20 years," claims Jimmy Durham of the International Indian Treaty Council.

Leaders and supporters agree, however, that the AIM that has survived is different from the AIM of 1968, or even the AIM of Wounded Knee. It has to a large extent forsaken its "vanguard" role and purposefully integrated itself into traditional tribal structures.

Its members are no longer outside activists from the cities, but are more often drawn from the broad spectrum of traditional tribal members on each reservation. And AIM does not often act alone, but as part of tribal organizations like the Lakota Treaty Council on Pine Ridge Reservation that have taken the lead in the Native Americans' major fight: the restoration of treaty rights and sovereignty.

In this process AIM has gradually developed a philosophy and strategy that more closely accords with the aspirations of the "traditionals" on the reservation. Tribal languages, religions and cultures - not political philosophies derived from the white world - provide an identity for the movement.

AIM leaders like Dennis Banks, for example, now eschew the potential economic benefits of developing natural resources on Indian lands where such actions conflict with the beliefs of the

traditionals. Rather than looking to increased revenues as the key answer to tribal problems, Banks worries about the impact of the economic rules learned from white America. "The greatest danger comes from the economic system. We must resist economic temptation. The real problem is the rape of mother earth."

Thus AIM will probably move more and more away from confrontational politics and tone down its more militant

rhetoric, emphasizing instead its adherence to traditional Indian spiritual values. Its activities will concentrate more on local projects such as its survival schools, food and cattle ranching cooperatives, and supporting traditional tribal leadership on the reservation.

Says Dennis Banks: "If there was to be a doctrine, it would be based on spiritual values. AIM has a kind of spiritual direction that this country needs. I don't see AIM perishing. You can't bury a spiritual movement."

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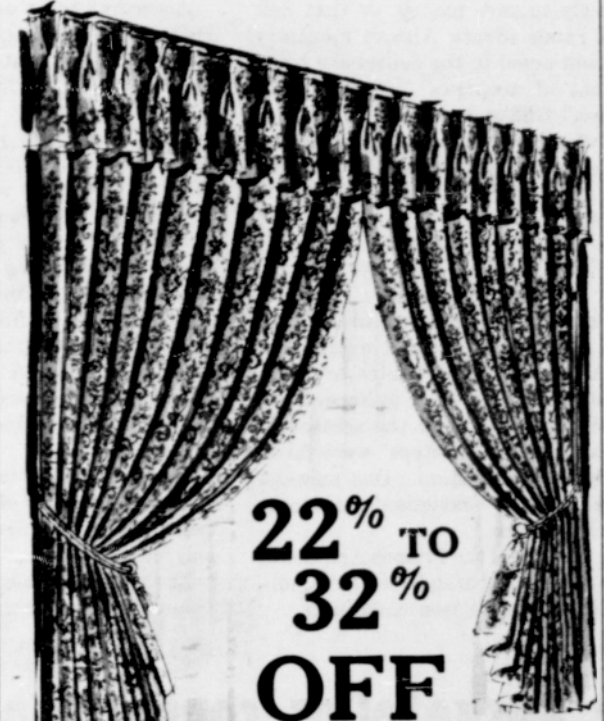
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## Displaced home makers NOW topic

Laurie Shields, national coordinator of Alliance for Displaced Homemakers, will speak at a brown bag luncheon at the Portland YWCA at noon, Friday, June 25th. She will visit Portland to encourage support for Oregon displaced homemaker centers similar to those established by the California legislature.

According to Shields, "Displaced homemakers are wives and mothers who gave up economic independence to take care of our families."

These women (usually 40 to 64) through death or divorce lose the financial support of their partner after years of caring for home and family. They are ineligible for unemployment benefits and do not have marketable skills. Because their children are grown, they cannot receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children. They may not be old enough to receive Social Security or may not have been married the twenty years necessary to receive benefits from their husband's employment.

The centers would use skills developed through caring for a family in training as resource persons and peer counselors for other older persons seeking assistance with health, housing, employment and other problems. The effort would not compete with young persons in an already strained job market, but would use existing skills to meet community needs.

Alliance for Displaced Homemakers developed from Jobs for Older Women. Working with the National Organization for Women Task Force on Older Women, the Alliance was instrumental in the creation of the California centers.

Ms. Shields' appearance is sponsored by the N.O.W. Task Force on Older Women, the Governor's Committee on the Status of Women, Oregon Council for Women's Equality, YWCA and the Department of Continuing Education.