Few moments in American history are as simultaneously momentous and overlooked as the birth of the Red Power Movement. Formed during the chaotic atmosphere of the 1960s, the Red Power Movement developed quietly at first, barely audible above the clamor of the largely African American-focused Civil Rights movement and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. Indeed, some Native scholars, Vine Deloria Jr. among them, felt the Civil Rights movement to be an exclusively Black demonstration, with little to no room for the grievances of non-Black minorities. In 1968, however, the situation changed; the Black Student Union (B.S.U.) and the Third World Liberation Front (T.W.L.F.) began a five-month-long strike on campus at San Francisco State College (S.F.S.C.).

The strike initially began as a cry for the reinstatement of George Mason Murray, a graduate student and Black Panther Party Minister of Education. Murray, who was originally hired as a teaching assistant in San Francisco State College’s English department, was reassigned to a non-teaching position (and subsequently suspended) for making inflammatory remarks at both Fresno and San Francisco State Colleges. Ultimately, the strike, now known as the Third World Strike, succeeded in creating the nation’s first College of Ethnic Studies.

The 1960’s were a tumultuous time for the United States of America. As the conservative lifestyle of the older generation began to fade, the generally more radical youth of America found their voices and began to cry out at perceived injustices in society. With an unpopular war raging in Vietnam and racial tensions coming to a head in the South, the United States seemed to be headed toward inescapable societal conflict. It was during this age of chaos that the cry for certain fundamental rights—desegregation, access to schools, equal opportunities, etc.—began to surface. Within the San Francisco Bay Area, S.F.S.C. became a hotbed of activity. At the same time, the federal government, under the jurisdiction of House Concurrent Resolution 108 (HCR-108), was in the midst of relocating hundreds of Native people to urban environments, including San Francisco.

In 1943, the United States Government began taking steps to fully assimilate all persons of Native American descent into American society and culture. This process, known as Termination and Relocation, started with a number of surveys of tribal conditions, and eventually morphed into 1953’s HCR-108. This act officially put the dissolution and subsequent relocation of over a hundred tribes, including “five large tribes (the Flathead, Klamath, Menominee, Pottowatomie, and Turtle Mountain Chippewa) and all tribes in four states (California, Florida, New York, and Texas)” into effect. This meant that tribes that had previously received reservation land and financial assistance were completely stripped of their status as federally recognized tribes, removed from federal land, and officially abolished. Because of the need to move large numbers of now-tribeless Native Americans from government land, these terminations resulted in a large, federally sponsored surge of Native individuals into urban areas, where they struggled to maintain their sense of culture and identity.

As the war in Vietnam escalated and the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, persons of color who had previously been largely ignored by the government began to assert themselves. S.F.S.C. students cried out against the unequal treatment of students who belonged to ethnic minorities; in 1968, the B.S.U. and T.W.L.F. began their strike, and the College of Ethnic Studies was soon formed. Almost nine months later, on the night of November 9, 1969, a group of S.F.S.C. students, led by Richard Oakes, himself a Native American of Mohawk descent, began their nineteen-month-long occupation of Alcatraz Island, starting a series of events that would

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2 San Francisco State College became San Francisco State University in 1974.
6 Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, 171.
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THE INCEPTION OF THE RED POWER MOVEMENT

This period should read this book facing eastward.” This text is important for contextualizing many of the thoughts and actions of the students, as the history of Native American struggles against oppression is intrinsically linked to the students’ own struggle. Of course, Brown’s work focuses on a very limited—though catastrophic—period, so it does not provide for a history of the events immediately before the occupation. It does, however, do a fantastic job of addressing the historical precedent of marginalization and abuse that laid the foundation for policies like HCR-108.

In order to analyze the shaping of the mentality of the individuals in question, it is important to have a complete understanding of the environment in which they were functioning. Vine Deloria Jr.’s Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto is an integral text in providing this understanding. Written in 1969, it offers a contemporary look at the problems facing Native people at the end of the 1960s. Deloria discusses a number of issues, including public perception of Native people, government policies and agencies, as well as issues of leadership within Indian society. His intent is mainly to raise awareness among Native youth, as well as to raise awareness among white Americans regarding the reasons behind Native discontentment.9 Deloria argues that the general population regarded events such as the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a sickness that had suddenly overcome American society, but posits that this sickness had actually begun “when the first Indian treaty was broken” and has simply continued into the present.9 He also argues that the Civil Rights Movement was exclusively a struggle between black and white communities, which left little room for other ethnic minorities. Although Deloria offers a candid analysis of the relationships of various minority groups to the white majority, and discusses at length the importance of nationalist movements, he is openly opposed to militancy of any kind, and therefore neglects to address the effect of militancy on the Red Power Movement, generally denying that it had any usefulness. This work suffers mostly from its proximity to the events in question, and therefore is unable to benefit from

8 Deloria, Jr, Custer Died for Your Sins, 268.
9 Ibid., 76.
hindsight. While it manages the important task of describing the environment in which the Red Power Movement began, it is unable to adequately approach an analysis of the environment’s actual impact on the movement.

Another work that is instrumental in elucidating the mentalities of the students, especially within the context of S.F.S.C., is the text for the exhibit of the same name, On Strike! Shut it Down! A Revolution at San Francisco State: Elements for Change, written and compiled by Helene Whitson and Wesley Kyles. The authors focus on the events of the 1968-69 strike that overtook S.F.S.C.’s campus, and address the context of the strike, explaining how it voiced the grievances of the B.S.U. and T.W.L.F., as well as the sentiment of nationalist movements throughout the United States. Quoting Walcott Beatty, the text describes the campus as “a microcosm of society.” They aim to contextualize the strike to facilitate a better understanding of what it was. Because the Red Power Movement was not initiated until after the strike, the authors do not mention the occupation of Alcatraz Island or the individuals involved, but they do provide details about the University’s measures taken to create the College of Ethnic Studies. Richard Oakes’ personal involvement in the creation of the Department of Native American Studies meant that its development would have directly impacted him, as well as those he encouraged to join the program. On Strike!’s coverage of the creation of the Ethnic Studies program can only increase our insight into the moments preceding the occupation that would have shaped the views of Oakes, as well as those of the students around him.

Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior’s Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee has the advantage of a more significant amount of hindsight, as it was written almost thirty years after the events of the occupation. Although they focus on the Red Power Movement as a whole, the authors spend at least a third of the text discussing the events of Alcatraz. Smith and Warrior offer a more personal account in Like a Hurricane, and are probably most helpful in profiling major figures within the occupation, including Richard Oakes himself. They discuss how Oakes’ time spent in the Mission District had shaped his work at S.F.S.C., and include numerous quotes from him. Unfortunately, their argument does not address the events surrounding the occupation, as this section of their text serves mostly as historical context for the larger picture of the Red Power Movement. Smith and Warrior do an excellent job of discussing the overall picture of the movement. They also address the shortcomings of the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.), another organization active at the time, and its hand in the unraveling of the Red Power Movement. Nevertheless, they still leave unanswered the question of the role of the Third World Strike in shaping the militancy and activism of Oakes and his fellows.

The most thorough look into the events preceding the occupation is found in Troy R. Johnson’s The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and the Rise of Indian Activism. As the title suggests, the text focuses solely on the occupation, rather than on the entire movement. Johnson argues that the occupation, though not necessarily successful in the short term, was instrumental in paving the way for the Nixon Administration’s policy changes in regards to Native peoples, and as a doorway to Indian self-determination. He also asserts that urbanization was a key part of pan-Indianism, and was largely responsible for facilitating the nationalist movement. He discusses the discontent of urbanized Natives and the effect it had in pushing these individuals towards activism, giving an in-depth overview of the larger context of the various social movements of the 1960s. However, its view still remains on a national level. Johnson establishes that there is a definite connection between the movement and the social climate of the 1960s, but does not assess the effects of S.F.S.C.’s own climate on the specific individuals in question.

What, then, was the Third World Strike’s impact on Richard Oakes and his fellow student activists? What role did the development of the College of Ethnic Studies play in this impact? Considering the Black Panther Party’s involvement on S.F.S.C.’s campus via its affiliation with the B.S.U., as well as its militancy (which Deloria worried would negatively influence Native


12 Johnson, The Occupation of Alcatraz Island, 14.
youth), what was its actual degree of influence on these students? While the termination of Native tribes and their subsequent forced urbanization were significant factors in the formation of the Red Power Movement, the similarity in the movement's purpose and actions to those of the Black Panther Party signify that the originators of the Red Power Movement must have been impacted by the B.S.U.'s actions on their campus. What was this impact, and was it a determining factor in pushing the students to make the bold move to occupy a federally owned island?

When the United States Government began to implement its policy of Termination and Relocation, it had set out with the purpose of erasing any and all remaining Native tribal identities. In order to do so, the Government offered to move Native families to cities like San Francisco, and promised to help them find jobs and homes. Upon arrival, however, Native people found that they had essentially been shipped to a new location and then subsequently abandoned. The United States Government was more interested in breaking up the tribal communities of Natives than in assisting Native families in their assimilation. It did not anticipate, however, that the many Natives who found themselves in urban cities would band together to form a community based on their cultural similarities and shared experiences. Native people – youth, especially – began to flock to Friendship Houses, where they were able to develop relationships with those similar to themselves. The American Indian Center (A.I.C.) of San Francisco was at the heart of this activity. The United States Government was more interested in breaking up the tribal communities of Natives than in assisting Native families in their assimilation. It did not anticipate, however, that the many Natives who found themselves in urban cities would band together to form a community based on their cultural similarities and shared experiences. Native people – youth, especially – began to flock to Friendship Houses, where they were able to develop relationships with those similar to themselves. The American Indian Center (A.I.C.) of San Francisco was at the heart of this activity. The A.I.C. provided a haven for Native youth. Alan Miller, Vice President of the A.I.C. in the Mission District and a student at S.F.S.C., used the Center's spaces as meeting rooms, where the youth, according to Miller, “more or less hung out.” These spaces created an area in which Native youth could discuss current events and conditions that affected them, such as the need for education. But these discussions were not necessarily confined to the A.I.C.

After moving from Rhode Island to California, Richard Oakes obtained a job working in a bar named “Warren’s” in the Mission District. Native Americans, many of whom had been moved to San Francisco through Relocation, constituted a large portion of the bar’s clientele. During his time at Warren’s, Oakes began to learn more about the situation of many of the Native people in San Francisco. Chief among the complaints of his patrons was that many felt “their own culture was inaccessible to them.” The experiences of both Alan Miller and Richard Oakes were intrinsically linked to the Termination and Relocation policy. It had been this policy that had abandoned thousands of Natives in the San Francisco Bay Area, and it had been this policy that had left them with poor housing and little to no education. Termination exacerbated the sense of isolation and the crisis of identity that plagued many Native youth. Even Oakes, who had moved to the city of his own volition, felt disconnected with his roots. In the documentary *Alcatraz is Not an Island*, Alan Miller discusses Oakes’ cultural identity crisis: “…He told me that he didn’t go into the longhouses; that he didn’t know a lot about the religion of the Mohawks.” Oakes’ own sense of isolation from his people echoed the feelings of those around him. And although the forced urbanization of Natives had caused this great loss, it served to facilitate the subsequent banding together of the local Native youth. This newfound sense of camaraderie helped to create the concept of pan-Indianism, the unity of various tribal groups through the commonality of being American Indian. Pan-Indianism would later serve as one of the main principles behind the occupation of Alcatraz Island, and would permeate the activities of the group in charge of the occupation – the Indians of All Tribes (I.A.T.). It was with this new sense of unity that the Native Americans of San Francisco came together to begin the process of self-determination. The urbanization had put Native Americans in forced contact with one another and, through their interactions, they realized that the problems they faced were not unique to a single tribe or reservation; rather, they were problems faced by all Native American tribes–problems faced by the Indians of All Tribes.

During the Third World Strike, the question of education for

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 *Alcatraz is Not an Island*. 

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ethnic minorities emerged. As had typically been the case in American schools, teachers and texts alike focused on subjects—especially history and anthropology—from a distinctly white perspective. With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the outcry against the war in Vietnam, non-white students were beginning to openly question the legitimacy of these practices and ask for an education with a much broader scope than the typically Euro-centric curriculum; for an education focused on issues more relevant to their own histories and cultures. Although a number of young Native Americans were enrolled at San Francisco State College, they remained largely inactive during the Third World Strike, and continued to operate on the fringes of the negotiations for the new college of Ethnic Studies, with another student organization acting as their proxy. Towards the end of the strike, the B.S.U. and T.W.L.F. each issued their own list of demands. Chief among them were the demands for a widening of the Black Studies department, and the creation of a “School of Ethnic Studies,” which later became the College of Ethnic Studies. Richard Oakes had enrolled in S.F.S.C. shortly before negotiations to end the strike began. Together with Alan Miller, he formed the Student Council of American Natives (S.C.A.N.). Luis S. Kemnitzer, a professor of Anthropology, was selected to be one of two faculty advisors for S.C.A.N. In his article, “Personal Memories of Alcatraz, 1969,” Kemnitzer recalls that “no identified American Indians were participating in the strike or negotiations at this time, and no plans for a Native American Studies Department were part of the goals of the strike.” In fact, the Native students had to rely on La Raza, an on-campus Latino student organization that had participated in the Third World Strike, to help negotiate on their behalf. Oakes and Miller, disheartened by the lack of Native participation, agreed that “something had to be done.” They had watched the students of the B.S.U. and T.W.L.F. rise up and demand a college for themselves, and they had been disappointed at the lack of Native student involvement. This had pushed them to form S.C.A.N., which focused on Native issues and culture. The club reflected much of what Oakes and Miller had witnessed in the Mission: the problem of Natives feeling culturally lost, “searching for meaning within their Indian soul.”

With the ending of the Third World Strike, S.F.S.C. became the first school in the United States to form a College of Ethnic Studies. The Native students, having worked closely with students of La Raza to secure a place in the college for themselves, were able to successfully form the Department of Native American Studies. This department became a draw for many of the young Natives in San Francisco, and led to the enrollment of a few specific individuals who would later go on to assist in the occupation of Alcatraz. It was within this department that the Native Students began to form the Red Power Movement; as Miller says, “[the Native students] all started the…Indian Native American Studies program at the same time; that’s where we started a lot of activism on the campus of San Francisco State.” The students began to desire something for themselves, something that reflected the ideals of their own culture, rather than the Euro-centric curriculum offered. Kemnitzer recalls, “[Richard Oakes], and others also, said that the structure and content of white people’s education was irrelevant to Indian experience and needs.” From the perspective of the Native students, the educational system offered what white society wanted them to learn, not what they wanted to learn. The students began the process of discussing what type of education they did want, and the common opinion was that they desired one of self-determination and Indian culture. The I.A.T. expressed this very keenly in the demands they made during their occupation of Alcatraz. In their Proclamation to the Great White Father and

20 Helene Whitson and Wesley Kyles, On Strike! Shut it Down!, 11-5.
All His People, the I.A.T. demanded a Native American Studies center, which would aim to “educate [Natives] to the skills and knowledge relevant to improve the lives and spirits of all Indian people.” At this point, the Native students had decided to fight back against the Euro-centricity of American academia, and to take their education into their own hands. It is possible this fight may not have taken place without the development of the College of Ethnic Studies; without the college, there may never have been a Department of Native American Studies, and without that department, scholars and students may never have addressed the question of Native education so thoroughly. Kemnitzer recalls that he and the students had spent a sizeable amount of time discussing what the Native American Studies Department would entail. It was this thorough discussion that raised questions of what was and was not relevant to the experience of being a Native American. Their involvement in the college also led the students to discuss the topic of activism; it was not until after the enrollment of the Native students in the department that the idea of occupying Alcatraz was first acknowledged. Mary Awrelia Justice, known to her classmates as Mary Lee Justice, had made the initial suggestion to Alan Miller and a number of other students. The political currents of San Francisco State and of the College of Ethnic Studies effectively swept the students towards activism, and towards the formation of the Red Power Movement.

The Third World Strike inspired the students to become active in their own communities and to fight for self-determination. The strike played a pivotal role in forming a place in a radically liberal environment—the S.F.S.C. campus—where Native youth could share ideas and concerns with one another. The club continued to work towards the formation of the Department of Native American Studies, and supported the efforts of the T.W.L.F. on campus. It could be argued that the occupation of Alcatraz and

the Red Power Movement would have come to fruition without the Third World Strike; it is true, for example, that Native youth had already spent much time congregating and exchanging ideas at the A.I.C. in the Mission. It is therefore possible that the A.I.C. could have served the same function as S.C.A.N. What the A.I.C. lacked, however, was the youthful vigor and militancy that came to be a part of the Red Power Movement. In this militancy, we can clearly see the influences of the B.S.U., which had direct ties to the Black Panther Party. While Vine Deloria had argued against the usefulness of the Black Power Movement’s militancy, stating that its vague militancy “provided very little understanding of problems or solutions,” he had written too close to the events to witness their final outcome. While a number of sources have commented on the occupation’s vagueness or lack of focus, none can deny that it did successfully bring Red Power and the issues of Native People to the attention of the nation. The Red Power Movement needed the militancy and fervor of the B.S.U.; it is this very enthusiasm that pushed Richard Oakes to actually jump into the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay and claim Alcatraz in more than just a figurative sense. While the movement may have floundered in the years following the occupation, its impact was powerful enough to push then-President Richard Nixon to address the issues faced by Native Americans and permanently halt the policy of Termination and Relocation.

Over the last forty years, the occupation of Alcatraz and the Red Power Movement have both dwindled to a faded memory in the collective consciousness of American society. One cannot deny, however, the effectiveness of the event and the subsequent movement in changing the United States government’s policies towards Native Americans. Although Natives still suffer under today’s system, the end of the policy of Termination and Relocation and the return of thousands of acres of land to Native people fostered hope within the Native communities that had been, up until that point, tragically absent. This movement would not have been possible without the forced urbanization of Natives, the Third World Strike at San Francisco State College, and the formation on said campus of the first College of Ethnic Studies. These factors

28 Indians of All Tribes, Alcatraz is Not an Island, ed. Peter Blue Cloud (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1972), 41.
30 Alcatraz is Not an Island.
32 Vine Deloria, Jr, Custer Died for Your Sins, 254.
The inception of the Red Power movement instilled a sense of nationalism and pan-Indianism into the Native students, which were ultimately the keys to the occupation. Without these sources of influence, it is likely that the Native youth would not have entertained the concept of the occupation of a federally owned island. As Richard Oakes once said, Alcatraz is not an island. It’s an idea.\(^{34}\) It was this idea that led the Native people to claim their right to the freedoms they so desperately needed and deserved.

\(^{34}\) Alcatraz is Not an Island.
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