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## Rhetorical Counterinsurgency: The FBI and the American Indian Movement

Casey Ryan Kelly

In 2007, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents Joseph H. and John M. Trimbach published a tell-all book to expose the crimes of American Indian Movement (AIM) and dispel contemporary myths about Bureau conspiracies against Indian activists. The book provides an insiders account of the agent's participation in the investigation of AIM and attempts to correct what they characterize as popular revisionist history accusing the FBI of gross injustices against Indian Country. The agents argue that as far as AIM is concerned, in the halls of academia, "There is a market for blurring the historical lines between fact and fiction" (2007, 6). While the book is cavalier, polemical, and one-sided, I take seriously their argument for scholars to revisit this controversy and place the FBI's investigation of AIM within its proper historical context. In their effort to exonerate the FBI, however, they accuse AIM and its apologists of distorting the true historical record. In doing so, the agents dismiss any suggestion that the FBI participated in the social construction of that history. Allen Megell and Deirdre M. McCloskey suggest, however, that history does not exist outside of discourse but rather "is concerned with tropes, arguments, and other devices of language used to write history and to persuade audiences" (1987, 221). Obsessed with the objective fact of AIM's alleged terrorist activities, the agents seem to dismiss the Bureau's rhetorical activity was, at times, nothing more than poor word choices. In this essay, however, I argue that the FBI's language was central to their approach, both in terms of the communicative techniques used to diffuse AIM as well as the topoi leveraged to rationalize extreme measures in defense of national interests. In revisiting the justifications for emergency measures against AIM, I situate the FBI's rhetoric within a cultural context of limited intellectual resources to comprehend radical Indian activism. The FBI utilized communicative techniques that

marshaled this limited cultural knowledge as a method of movement suppression. I argue that the rhetoric of the FBI's investigation of AIM from 1971 to 1976 illuminates the contours of what I term rhetorical counterinsurgency.

As first explicated by U.S Army Special Forces in 1960 and adapted domestically by the FBI's counterintelligence bureau (COINTELPRO), counterinsurgency operations included unconventional military and nonmilitary activities to disrupt and destroy dissident movements, guerilla organizations, and general revolutionary activity. Such operations included direct intervention into media institutions to conduct psychological warfare, information warfare, propaganda, and disinformation. Counterinsurgency operations required an advanced strategic understanding of how communicative practices can be marshaled to secure government interests and win the hearts and minds of the public. Rhetorical counterinsurgency constitutes a systematic and strategic set of communicative techniques or instruments which, when used in combination, manage, dissipate, and suppress radicalism. Building on the concept of rhetorical exclusion developed by John Sanchez, Mary Stuckey, and Richard Morris (1999), I situate such communicative practices that work in the interests of the state against those of popular movements as a part of modern governance. Ronald W. Greene argues that rhetorical practices thought of as technologies of governance enable the management of "a population, space, and/or object by articulating an ensemble of human technologies into a function network of power to improve public welfare" (1998, 2).

While social movement scholarship is strong on the material methods by which those in power thwart revolutionary and subversive activity, more work needs to be done to explore the inner workings of rhetorical practices that provide interpretative guidance to discredit the symbolic and argumentative justifications for social protest. To contribute to this theoretical work, I argue that rhetorical counterinsurgency is reflexive and epistemic. It affects the approach of the individuals and institutions who wield it as technique of control while it reproduces narrow intellectual interpretations of social protest messages.

This essay unfolds in three sections. First, I develop a theory of rhetorical counterinsurgency and explain its refinement within the FBI as a method of threat control and management. Second, I situate

rhetorical counterinsurgency within a series of migrating cultural contexts, including the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and cultural stereotypes of American Indians. These contexts constrained the available interpretations of Indian, as well as non-Indian radicalism and justified the application of techniques of counterinsurgency. Finally, I offer a rhetorical analysis of both the FBI's use of communicative tactics as a method of counterinsurgency as well as the content of their rhetorical constructions of AIM. I investigate two disarming topoi of savagery: AIM as communist surrogate and American Viet Cong.

### Rhetorical Dimensions of Counterinsurgency

As leveraged against American Indian activism, Sanchez, Stuckey, and Morris explain that rhetorical exclusion is (1999, 28) “one strategy used by members of the prevailing power structure to conceal any antidemocratic consequences of its actions.” As a strategy of counterinsurgency, rhetorical exclusion is a mechanism by which institutional structures of power mobilize definitions, images, and other symbolic activities to diffuse challenges to its legitimacy while concealing its own repressive tactics. Mark Meister and Ann Burnett extend the concept of rhetorical exclusion by showing how language strategies, particularly at work in the trial transcript of *United States v. Leonard Peltier*, were a part of a strategic order to “interpret the social order so that power is legitimized” (2004, 723). Similar to rhetorical exclusion, John Murphy and Mary Stuckey (2001) argue that the colonization in North America was largely a rhetorical process that primed people and land for colonial violence. Furthermore, focusing on its roots in early American iconography, rhetorical critic Jeremy Engels connects the rhetorical maneuvers of colonizing discourses to demonstrate the “relationship between violence, nation-building, rhetorical invention, and the colonization of Native Americans” (2005, 2). Anthropologist Jeanette Haynes Writer (2002) even contends that such rhetorical strategies sanctioned wholesale violence in such a way as to constitute a form of state-sponsored terrorism against American Indians. These works in rhetorical studies, as well as a great many in American Indian studies, demonstrate a connection between violence against American Indians and the rhetorical practices of colonizing institutions.

While rhetorical counterinsurgency is an intentional practice directed to dissipate threatening and subversive social movements, I do not argue that there was a vast conspiracy against the American Indian Movement. I merely suggest that there is a connection between the uptake of the FBI's narrative of AIM violence and the resources available for public interpretation of their message and goals. I seek to extend the theoretical relationship between rhetoric, governmentality, and the suppression of social movements by examining the consequences of the FBI's rhetorical construction of AIM. The rhetorical dimensions of FBI investigations are a useful site at which to explore this relationship because of its role as both an information gathering and information producing agency. While the agency may not have intended malice, the FBI's surveillance projects had consequences for the possible interpretations of American Indian rhetoric and political activism on all fronts, legitimate or criminal.

In the *Rhetoric of Agitation and Control*, John Bowers, Donavan Ochs, and Richard Jensen (1993) argue that the "rhetorical stance" taken by the establishment against threatening social activism is plagued by the constraints of governmentality and social management (47).

The decision makers must show that their ability to manage, guide, direct, and enhance the group is great than that of other members in the group. Rhetoric plays an important roles in maintaining decision makers in their position of power...One principle governs that rhetorical stance taken by any establishment: Decision makers must assume that the worst will happen in a given instance of agitation. The corollary to that principle is equally important: Decision makers must be prepared to repel any attack on the establishment.

When agencies charged with law enforcement encounter radical social movements, they are likely to apply an interpretive framework of criminality and deviance to their behavior and prepare against worst case scenarios. One important avenue for such preparations involves public performances of law enforcement readiness. The public image of an establishment as exercising judicious and legitimate countermeasures against subversion is a fundamental component of diffusing radical agitation. It controls public sympathies and positively frames the role of law enforcement. In addition to the discharge of their duties in relation to criminal investigations, law enforcement agencies participate in

rhetorical activities that shape possible interpretations of their activities when confrontations become matters of public record. Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell suggest that these (2006, xi) "techniques may range over a wide array of symbolic or physical acts, but the central and simple purpose is to alter and manipulate public attitudes, perceptions, and ultimately behavior in such a way as to benefit those employing such techniques." As Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen suggest, suppression strategies require rhetorical to discredit the movement's message in order to "stop the spread of that ideology by hindering the goals and personnel of the agitative movement" (54).

Law enforcement framing that conceives of radical protest as a confrontation with insurgent forces can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, likely to criminalize social movement behavior in a process of asymmetrical escalation to eliminate the threat, real or perceived. While rhetorical counterinsurgency is not a conspiratorial enterprise, the consequences can disarm valuable social messages, reinforce state power, create the conditions for violent confrontation, and demonize social movements. This conclusion is particularly salient in the case of American Indian dissent because of their vast cultural difference from mainstream non-Indian society and history of direct military conflict with the U.S. government. Craig Smith, Rasmussen, and Makela argue that their analysis of government suppression strategies against American Indians reveals "clearly the manner in which a Eurocentric culture responds to an alien one" (1996, 82). Put differently, the vast cultural gap between activist agitating for the return of Indian lands and the interests of Euro-American institutions magnified law enforcement's perception of AIM's growth as dangerous.

As a general phenomenon, when marshaled in the defense of state interests against so-called subversive activity, practices of rhetorical exclusion and rhetorical colonialism constitute techniques of governance whereby the state embeds populations, discourses, and social institutions in an economy of knowledge, power, and meaning. As opposed to the ancient juridical mode in which power was exercised through the raw visible spectacle of sovereign violence, power is most efficiently exercised through the discursive practices that arrange ideas, signs, and meanings in specific configurations that then enable particular applications of state interests to the management of populations. Michel Foucault explains (1977, 102):

This discourse provided, by means of the theory of interests, representations and signs, by the series and geneses that it reconstituted, a sort of general recipe for the exercise of power over men [sic]: the 'mind' as a surface inscription of power, with semiology as its tool the submission of bodies through the control of ideas; the analysis of representations as a principle in a politics of bodies that was much more effective than the ritual anatomy of torture and execution.

While the direct application of violence to the body had once served as a primary method of state control, it was the metamorphosis of punitive justice into a ubiquitous strategy of normalization, regimentation, and management that sustained the existing social order. While force is still a political fact of governmentality, it is the ability of the state apparatus to control the interpretation of social violence that enables the effective administration of both overt and covert punitive practices. While Foucault is concerned with the diffusion of such practices into the social body, it is important that critics not lose sight of the rhetorical techniques that enable particular types of governing relationships in which the direct application of force is made possible, and in some instances inevitable. For the purposes of this essay, governance or governmentality is defined by a set of rhetorical techniques that enable particular types of control not necessarily a singular location or institution.

Greene extends the relationship between rhetoric and governmentality by arguing that "rhetorical practices stabilize meaning by distributing populations, discourses and institutions on the terrain of a governing apparatus so that a series of judgments might be made about the art of government" (30). While Greene explains the relationship between rhetoric and governance as the unfolding of practical reasoning through deliberation, I apply this theoretical understanding to the informal processes of governance that seek to undermine the public's deliberative capacity. Extending Greene's observation that rhetorical practices help calibrate governing apparatuses, I argue that rhetorical counterinsurgency extends governmental administration by fine-tuning mediated networks of public discourse, often through disinformation, counterintelligence, and propaganda, to produce ideological interpretations of threats to the existing order and responses to those threats. This is accomplished through the controlled production and circulation of knowledge about dissident populations. Such practices are sustained through the



circulation of information and its recirculation through government bureaucracy and mass-media sources.

Through surveillance, agent provocateurs, and amassing intelligence about subversive organizations, law enforcement agencies achieve totally mastery over information. The subsequent bureaucratic analysis of intelligence data and its recirculation through media sources for public consumption completes a feedback loop where intelligence is turned into a carefully crafted strategy to shape public memory about government and movement activities. The process of informing and intelligence gathering is a generative moment for the rhetoric of counterinsurgency. In his probative work on the operations the FBI's Counterintelligence Bureau (COINTELPRO), Nelson Blackstone argues that (1975, xi) "Informers don't just passively take notes. They act. And they act out of their loyalty to the FBI, not to the political group. Therefore, informers interfere with the freedom of speech and association of those members who have the best interests of the organization at heart." Completing the functions of governmentality, informing, gathering intelligence, and surveillance are deployed to articulate interested knowledge about targeted populations. Information circulation has a synergistic effect of continually calibrating the mechanisms of state repression and control. Foucault explains that these techniques produce "compulsory visibility" whereby subjects are rendered visible, knowable, and pliable to the exercise of power while the mechanisms of such power are made invisible (187). In the case of addressing threats and suppressing dissent, the production of knowledge about threatening movement activities mystifies the inner-workings of power by rendering techniques of the FBI increasingly difficult to identify. The FBI's construction of AIM as an insurgent guerrilla terrorist organization with communist ties obscured any rationale for their activity, decontextualized their use of force, and justified extreme responses to their agitation.

### Migrating Contexts of Insurgency

The FBI's rhetorical construction of AIM marshaled easily identifiable discourses concerning political violence, both international and domestic, to offer interpretations of their radical agitation and

justify extreme measure of repression. Topoi of insurgency, communist infiltration, and guerrilla warfare drew from the culturally available explanations of threats to the existing order that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's. Cold War critic Robert Ivie characterizes such topoi as the culturally available assumptions or resources of invention rhetors use to (1980, 282) "generate a number of specific statements that serve as premises, warrants, or points of identification in support of predetermined claims." Multiple overlapping historical contexts illuminate the cultural topoi available to discuss radical American Indian activism and the FBI's choices to invent and contain their agitation from 1971 to 1976. First, the looming specter of Viet Cong guerrilla warfare in Vietnam and the Cold War political culture obsessed with containing the ubiquitous and amorphous threat of communist infiltration provided a readily available lexicon of threat assessment, construction, and response. Radical protest organizations that articulated subversive political critiques of American imperialism and advocated confrontation and resistance (such as the AIM, the Black Panther Party, Students for a Democratic Society, the New Left, and a litany of other groups) fell under the purview of the FBI's COINTELPRO program and associated surveillance programs. As Sociologist David Cunningham explains, FBI counterintelligence programs were designed to (2003, 329) "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of protest groups and individual 'key activists' that, in their view, engaged in actions that threatened the security of the U.S. government." Historian James Davis (1997) compiles evidence that these operations were honed first against radical organizations of the political left and right: the American Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Ku Klux Klan. In his systematic analysis of the use and purpose of the FBI's counterintelligence programs against the New Left, Cunningham argues that the counterintelligence program were dangerous because they blurred the line between foreign and domestic enemies and between protest and national security threats (2003b, 234):

The history of the organization, especially under J. Edgar Hoover but in some important ways today as well, shows a consistent pattern of defining abstract threats (whether they be from anarchists, communists, or terrorists) that are then found and dealt with in an often self-fulfilling manner. The larger purposes of such activity, beyond the preservation of national security, have undoubtedly included self-aggrandizement and securing ever-increasing budgetary allocations (Donner 1980; Powers 1987).

The FBI's rhetoric concerning social movement activism tended to reduce the motives for agitation to either communism or terrorism. Their inability to distinguish protest from domestic insurgency was connected to circulating discourse about the ambiguous nature of threats to American power. These discourses solidified prior to the full-scale development of FBI counterintelligence; from the end of World War II through the height of the McCarthy-era in 1955. Director J. Edgar Hoover argued that it was his organization's charge to expose "a force of traitorous communists, constantly gnawing away like termites at the very foundations of American society" (Hoover 1950, quoted in Grossman 1995, par. 31). Hoover's dubious construction of communism itself was, at best, an empty signifier and at worst and misleading label for all perceived threats to national security. Anti-war movement historian Tom Wells suggests that (1994, 4) "officials attributed the wellsprings of dissent more to emotionalism, character flaws, and sinister external forces than reasoned judgment. Indeed, both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and many of their aides, were convinced that foreign communists were behind the dissent." Furthermore, Fredrik Logevall suggests that regardless of the public reception of such messages about the nature of communism and domestic insurgency, "those on the left who might have put forth an alternative vision no longer had cultural or political approval. Those on the right had the field largely to themselves" (2001, 82). As Hoover suggests, the communist threat was perceived by the FBI and other law enforcement organizations as foreign and domestic, a fifth column threatening to collapse America from within through partisan resistance. The threat was not only from the Moscow and Peking, but from the collective strength of "terminates," small infestations taking a variety of forms from guerilla warriors in Vietnam to subversive radicals within the United States. As I argue later in the analysis, while the FBI concern about AIM was also connected to their militant demand for the return of Indian lands, they also express paranoia that Indian activists are linked to communist organizations within and outside of the country.

The military context of the Vietnam War is essential to understand the FBI's rhetorical construction of AIM. The tactics and topoi used to construct and confront the communist threat in Vietnam migrated into the domestic public sphere. First, in addition to the amorphous

specter of communism, communication historian Christopher Simpson (1994) argues that the concept of “worldview warfare,” psychological and ideological indoctrination, emerges from collaboration between the U.S. military and applied researchers in mass communication. Simpson argues that during World War II, worldview warfare techniques were used to immunize immigrant populations against Soviet and Axis propaganda. Simultaneously, during the Kennedy Administration, the U.S Special Forces were formed to develop new military strategies and war-fighting doctrines to deal with sub-national, guerrilla, or insurgent military forces (Marquis 1997). The concept of counterinsurgency first appeared in the U.S. Army Special Forces manual titled *Counter-Insurgency Operations* in 1960 (McClintock 1992). Given that insurgent or paramilitary forces could camouflage as and within civilian populations, counterinsurgency operations relied on subtle yet confusing distinctions between military and civilian targets. Counterinsurgency tactics were used against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces because of their ability to conceal guerilla activity within humble natural landscapes and everyday village life. Counterinsurgency operations during the Vietnam War aimed to eliminate the natural advantage of a popular insurgent force through a variety of tactics designed to undermine their human resource base including, but not limited to, the use of chemical defoliants to erode the Viet Cong’s environmental resources and indirect training and support of South Vietnamese paramilitary forces (Nagl 2002). Simpson argues that counterinsurgency and worldview warfare operations also expanded to include economic development projects “to win the hearts and minds of Vietnam’s peasant population through propaganda, creation of ‘strategic hamlets,’ and similar forms of controlled social development under the umbrella of U.S. Special Forces troops” (84).

While not directly causal, the simultaneous emergence of foreign and domestic counterinsurgency operations demonstrates the development of a situated vocabulary, and corollary approach and attitude, toward radical organizations in the United States and abroad. As Simpson’s work suggests, the research that emerges from academic institutions on propaganda, worldview warfare, and counterinsurgency provided the U.S. government with a range of proven tactics to combat emerging threats to national security. These

tactics were also communicative, rhetorical, and ideological. The findings of counterinsurgency research provided lessons for modern warfare that had dire consequences for radical organizations in the United States. Modern warfare was constructed as unconventional. It took place in non-traditional settings and required combat in civilian settings, always in an ideological struggle for hearts and minds.

Finally, the social and discursive context of conquering new frontiers in Vietnam had profound implications for American Indian activism in particular. The application and circulation of Indian Country and frontier metaphors to describe the conflict-zone in Vietnam reanimated the topoi of savagery used by the U.S. military in the previous century to combat Indian violence and guerrilla resistance on the frontier. Literary critic David Espey (1994) argues the American Indian subtext to military perceptions of the Viet Cong, along with popular representations of the Vietnam War in film and literature, created strong parallels between the mythology of the American frontier and rationalizations for brutality against the North Vietnamese (par. 1):

Among the many changes in American culture influenced by the Vietnam War in the years 1968-75 were transformations in the popular image of the American Indian and in Native American political consciousness. Vietnam and the Indians share a curious association in the American imagination. In the early years of the war, the United States often thought of Vietnam in images of the American West and cast the Vietnamese in the role of Indians.

Military commanders and soldiers invoked the mythical Euro-American lexicon of Indian Country to describe the untamed wilderness of Vietnam and the savagery of the North Vietnamese. Espey traces the frontier theme through the official rhetoric of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the expressions of on-the-ground Vietnam veterans to uncover how the imagery of Indian savagery pervaded their orientation toward the Vietnamese. In the eyes of the U.S. military, the tactics of guerilla warfare employed by the Viet Cong bared similar markers to those experienced by the U.S. cavalry in the nineteenth century (Slotkin 1973; Drinnon 1997). In his book *Chasing Ghosts: Unconventional Warfare in American History*, John Tierny (2007) explains that military confrontation with Seminoles, the Sioux, and the Navajo, often resulting in massacres, were their earliest and most haunting

encounters with guerilla warfare. While tribal resistance tactics were by no means monolithic, Tierny argues as follows (78):

Yet, there was at least a common denominator between all the tribes and all of the centuries. The Indians almost always fought in unorthodox, irregular fashion: their lack of discipline and organization, their stealth and surprise, their disdain for rules or procedures, their dress, their tactics, their attitudes – all of these attributes were unorthodox in comparison to either European or U.S. Army training manuals and battle procedures. Some tribes, moreover, were extremely adept at sustained and disciplined guerrilla war, as distinguished from irregular battle habits. The Seminoles, the Sioux, and the Navajo were high on the list. But throughout the long years of Indian warfare the settler had to cope with the type of adversary he could never understand from textbooks.

Indian Country constitutes one of the most powerful topoi available to construct the ambivalent mission in Vietnam. To explain the ubiquity and circulation of meanings of guerrilla warfare, Espey also demonstrates the uptake of Indian War metaphors in popular culture, such as the John Wayne film *The Green Beret* (1968) in which the Vietnamese speak and act like caricatures of Sioux warriors. Espey cites other literary and popular culture critics have observed the Indian-Vietnam connection. For example, Phillip Melling (1990) identifies strong similarities between the New England Puritan garrison mentality, Indian “captivity narratives,” and soldier narratives that construct the profane space of Vietnamese wilderness as iconic of the savagery of Vietnamese guerilla warfare. Furthermore, Michael Yellow Bird, Director of the Center for Indigenous Nations Studies at the University of Kansas, argues that metaphors of cowboys and Indians provided a context for dehumanization in Vietnam (2004, 43):

One of the most infamous massacres embodying the cowboys and Indians theme was My Lai, where American soldiers murdered as many as five hundred unarmed civilians—old men, women, and children. A unit of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry, the soldiers responsible for this slaughter, said that My Lai was inevitable because the Viet Cong were regarded as Indians.

While the evidence suggests parallels between the construction of Indian savagery and similar types of violence enacted a century later in Vietnam, I seek to bring that context back to the domestic politics of radicalism to explain the effectiveness of rhetorical counterinsurgency

against American Indian activists. The ways in which images of Viet Cong and Indian militants stand in the place of one another demonstrates the resource of invention available for the U.S. military, the FBI, and other law enforcement agencies embedded within constructed scenes of insurgency and counterinsurgency to rationalize their perceived enemy. Enacting counterinsurgency domestically against American Indian radicals reproduced the rhetorical forms and contexts of parallel insurgent environments and necessitated the application of topoi that rationalized counterinsurgency against a guerrilla enemy. Thus, in their enactment of counterinsurgency against AIM, the FBI marshaled topoi of communist infiltration, guerrilla enemies, and irrational or unjustified violence. While the FBI proceeded against AIM as if this were truly the case, the FBI also utilized rhetorical venues to shape the public's interpretation of AIM's radical and unconventional form of agitation. I identify two complementary and sometimes contradictory images of AIM: the communist surrogate and the Viet Cong guerrilla.

### AIM as Communist

In 1971 the Senate Internal Security Administration released a report titled "The Assault on Freedom" of which a large section was devoted to exposing the ties between the Communist Party and the American Indian Movement. The report, referenced for its accuracy by the Senate Judiciary committee in 1976, alleged Indian activism was directly connected to a world-wide communist revolution (2):

The Communist Party for more than a year now has been both supporting and sparkplugging the so-called "American Indian Liberation Movement." The decision to make the Indian Liberation Movement a major point of emphasis was made at a "National Conference of Indian Liberation" convened "somewhere in the Western United States" in November 1969 . . . Communist Party Chairman Henry Winston keyed the conference by describing the Indian Liberation Movement as "one of the four major national struggles in our country."

Throughout the organization's ascendance to national prominence, law enforcement searched to connect AIM to a broader network of conspiracies including both the U.S. Communist Party as well as foreign communist insurgents. The rhetoric of anti-communism served three functions. First, however dubious the claim may have

been, the link to communism highlighted that a force other than Indians was in control of the organization. This enabled the FBI to make arguments that AIM did not speak for a majority of American Indians. In the 1976 Congressional hearing on **Revolutionary Activities within the United States**, Senator James O. Eastman, argues there was a connection between AIM and the American Communist Party. As a result, real Indians were not in control of AIM. He argues that “the record is clear that the elected tribal councils look upon the American Indian Movement as a radical and subversive organization” (2). Second, the rhetoric linked Indian activists to an omnipresent enemy of Soviet infiltration that reemerged camouflaged as a seemingly benign organization. Decades of cultural knowledge about the scourge of communism could be easily mapped onto AIM’s rhetoric and activism. This rhetoric reduced the complexity of AIM’s message from a struggle for social justice to a simple plot of communist deception. Third, it highlighted the urgency of immediate action to counter the threat, specifically by the FBI which had taken early propriety over communist investigations and counterintelligence in the 1950’s.

While AIM did express anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist views, their demands were more particular than universal. They demanded specific rights in the area of tribal self-determination; the enforcement of guaranteed treaty rights, elimination of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, preservation of an Indian land base, and a return to traditional indigenous languages, religions, and lifestyles. American Indian intellectual Vine Deloria humorously notes that while (1974, 3) “the New Left welcomed Indian activist at its rallies” such movements were shocked to learn that “Indians were not planning to share the continent with their oppressed brothers once the revolution was over.” While AIM shared goals with other minority, Third World, and even communist groups, their struggle was specific to the Indian experience in North America. Deloria argues that AIM activists understood their demands and tactics as a continuation of a deeply historic Indian struggle as opposed to being new and derivative. While they were sympathetic to the Marxist critique of American capitalism emerging within the New Left, AIM did not fit because there was no place for the return of Indian lands as a collective goal.

AIM, originally called CIA (Concerned Indians of American), was founded in Minneapolis in 1968 by Dennis Banks, Russell Means,



Clyde Bellcourt, George Mitchell and several other prominent Indian activists. Similar to that of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, before taking the reigns of self-determination, they served as a watch-dog organization to protect Twin Cities Indians from police harassment and brutality (Smith and Warrior 1996; Means 1995). Dennis Banks (2004) notes that most, including him, did an extensive amount of time in the state penitentiary because they were too poor to raise bail or hire legal council. In his autobiography, Leonard Peltier (1999) humorously refers to the Minnesota state penitentiary as the “Indian finishing school” for his generation of AIM activists. AIM members organized to report and monitor police abuse, provide legal council and raise bail for Indian defendants, and unify the Twin Cities American Indian community (92). AIM quickly ascended to national prominence as an activist organization in part because of the rising ethnic nationalism expressed in the fishing rights protests in Washington State, the occupation of Alcatraz Island, and a series of other occupations at Mt. Rushmore, Pit River, and Plymouth Rock (Cobb and Fowler 2007; Johnson 2007; Nagel 1997). AIM chapters quickly sprouted in several other U.S. cities. AIM grabbed the attention of law enforcement when they occupied the small town of Gordon, Nebraska in 1972 to protest what they characterized as misconduct in the prosecution of the murder of Oglala ranch hand Raymond Yellow Thunder.

Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior argue that “The initials—A-I-M—underscored all of that, creating an active verb rich in power and imagery. You aimed at a target. You could aim for victory, for freedom, for justice. You could also, defiantly, never aim to please. Written vertically and stylized a bit, the acronym became an arrow” (127). To match their militant naming and goals, AIM utilized tactics that were highly confrontational and unconventional. The use of occupations, invasion and infiltration of iconic spaces, and symbolic reclamations of land as a form of protest classified AIM one of the more extreme and militant organizations of their time. The organizations occupation of Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters as a part of “Trail of Broken Treaties” in 1972, suggested the movement shared a common goal of exercising their legally guaranteed and spoke with a voice attuned to pulse of Indian Country. While their tactics may have been controversial within the Indian community, Smith and Warrior note that AIM membership “exploded across reservations and cities

from North Carolina to the Pacific Northwest during 1972” (138). The occupation at Gordon, a result of a plea for help from Yellow Thunder’s mother to Dennis Banks and Russell Means, demonstrated that ties were improving between urban and reservation Indians.

While the name, character, and growing strength of the organization indicated that AIM represented the views of Indian Country, the rhetoric of anti-communist leveraged by the FBI indicated that either the movement’s leaders had betrayed their adherents or communist insurgents were exploiting Indian causes to foment revolution. Either way, the resulting picture was of a small cadre of radicals that did not represent the viewpoints of real American Indians. Senator Eastman testifies that “the elected tribal councils speak for the masses of the Indian people” (United States 1976, 2). The claim casts doubt on whether AIM’s radical tactics and accompanied critique of the BIA and federal Indian law accurately represented the views of American Indians. The Congressional testimony of undercover FBI agent Douglas Durham provides a good representative anecdote of the FBI’s rhetorical strategy of anti-communism to cast doubt on AIM’s authoritative voice. Durham infiltrated AIM from 1973 to 1975 and ascended to the highest levels of the organization while collecting what he argues was “considerable information regarding its revolutionary activities” (United States 1976, 4). In addition to identifying an ideology of violence and guerrilla terrorism, Durham goes to great lengths to emphasize that AIM is a communist front organization. He contends that “it appears the American Indian Movement is gaining more credibility with Communist-front organizations and becoming more recognized internationally” (9). Durham argues that the movement used Indian causes as cover for communist revolution. Exposing what he considers a lack of media scrutiny, Durham explains that “there is a widespread impression, unfortunately shared by too many people in the media, that the American Indian Movement is just simply a reform movement committed to creating a better way of life for the American Indian. Nothing could be further from the truth” (3). Durham presents documents from other organizations that have been disowned by AIM as proof that the true voices that represented Indian Country was not in control.

Like a proverbial red herring, the notion that communists held the reigns of the movement side-stepped the entire question of treaty

violations as a legitimate subject of protest. Many legal scholars note the federal government's failure to abide by the nearly 400 treaties signed and ratified through the late nineteenth century (Johansen 2004; Williams 2005; Williams 2001, Wilkinson 1987). An even more subtle consequence of communist association was that part of justification for war in Vietnam was premised on a U.S. commitment to treaty obligations and as a corollary, communist violation of international treaties. As President Nixon promised in 1969, in contrast to communist aggressors "the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments." Deloria argues that (1971, 28) "Richard Nixon warned the American people that Russia was bad because she had not kept any treaty or agreement signed with her. You can trust the Communists, the saying went, to be communists." The prevailing discourse of Soviet Union treaty violations provided evidence as to the moral character of communism and low-lighted America's own treaty abrogation at home. Deloria continues that "it would take Russia another century to make and break as many treaties as the United States has already violated" (28). In the context of a protest movement articulating specific demands to enforce Indian treaties, anti-communist rhetoric shifted the burden of proof to AIM, standing in the place of all communists, to demonstrate their trustworthiness. The history of U.S. treaty violations against American Indians was over-shadowed by the crimes and treaty violations of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes. The central question became the communist moral character, not the degree to which treaty violations against American Indians betray the spirit of democracy. Under such circumstances, it would seem unreasonable for the federal government to negotiate with AIM because communists, much like those in the Kremlin, do not adhere to their signed agreements and promises. In fact, communist insurgents and despots only understand violence. As the argument goes, only democracies abide by international norms and live up to their promises. By shifting the focus from AIM's criticism of America's own treaty violations to the duplicity of agreements and promises of communist regimes and the universal character of communism itself, the rhetoric of anti-communism disarmed and diffused legitimate critique. What's more, the demands for treaty enforcement were framed as generating from communists rather than organically emerging from Indian Country. Such demands were portrayed as being contrived by

communist opportunists to contain American power by treaties they themselves have no intention to follow.

The second and third consequence of anti-communist rhetoric was that it mapped conveniently over AIM's tactics and played on familiar fears and caricatures that provoked urgency and extreme action in defense of freedom. AIM was constructed as a fifth column, as one of a number of related organizational instruments of foreign communist regimes deployed to infiltrate and destabilize the U.S. in advance of international revolution. Trimbach and Trimbach, summarizing the 1976 report on AIM argue that "It is a frankly revolutionary organization which is committed to violence . . . Some of AIM's leaders . . . have visited Castro and/or consider themselves Marxist-Leninist" (12). Trimbach and Trimbach, as well as the Congressional report, linked AIM to a vast conspiracy of other leftist organizations and emerging communist regimes that have infiltrated the U.S. including "foreign ties, direct and indirect—with Castro, with China, with the IRA, with the Palestine Liberation Organization . . . the Weather Underground, the Communist Party, the Trotskyists, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Black Panther Party . . ." (12). This argument flattened the wide tactical and political differences between each organization, reducing all radical activity as commensurate and analytically indistinguishable. Revolutionary activity of any kind, from AIM to the PLO, could easily be categorized under an empty signifier of communism. By blurring important distinctions between the goals of each organization listed above, AIM could be more easily categorized as a simple and familiar, yet dangerous enemy. AIM is often mentioned among a laundry list of explicitly Marxist-Leninist organizations in ways the suggested connections by innuendo. In the FBI's *Domestic Terrorist Digest*, AIM is mentioned in the same breath as that Puerto Rican Independence Movement and the Weather Underground as one of three organizations mobilizing against America's bicentennial celebration. The *Digest* suggest that AIM was organizing to "'blow out the candles' on America's birthday cake" along with "the Weather Underground to 'bring the fireworks,'" and that "the possibility of Puerto Rican independence groups engaging in terrorist activity exists" (1). While AIM was not directly linked to Marx-Leninism, the evidence for the Puerto Rican Independence Movement is strongly foregrounded in the *Digest*, suggesting some

connection. The inference in this document is that these organizations were working together to coordinate attacks for presumably the same reasons.

The strategic ambiguity of the FBI's assertion makes it reasonable to conclude that because they share similar anti-American and anti-imperial sentiments that they could be categorized under a master signifier of communism or Marx-Leninism. As a rhetorical strategy, ambiguity and equivocation create identification and unity between disparate and singular elements. In the case of AIM, the ambiguity between elements aggregates enemies under the single sign of communism. Ambiguity enables renaming by a process of association and disassociation, in which as Kenneth Burke argues one (1973, 174) "throws something out by one name and brings it back by another name." Simultaneously, this strategy also creates identification among those in dialectical opposition to either communism or any of the radical groups associated with AIM. Put differently, this rhetorical strategy defines Americans as unified by what they are not. The rhetoric of enemy creation produces homogeneity within opposing forces. Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp argue that such rhetoric enables (2002, 192) "the creation of identification among opposing entities on the basis of a common enemy." For the FBI, communism was the most sinister homogenous category available to describe seemingly un-American activity. The differences among radical protest organizations were flattened to create a common enemy that desired social disintegration and an end to the American way of life. The ever-present and ubiquitous nature of the threat, as one organization with many faces, justified swift and extreme action. The FBI represented the revolution as imminent and life threatening. Agent Durham contends that "The leaders have repeatedly predicted revolution . . . They must be stopped!" (9).

### AIM as Viet Cong

AIM's militancy was met with equal and opposite resistance. The FBI approached AIM as a guerilla or domestic terrorist organization that harbored intentions to kill in support of their objectives. As reflected in the testimony of agent Durham, AIM was "dedicated to

the overthrow of our Government” and “they have been engaged in or planned every type of action model program – known to terrorist guerrillas today and have used the ‘propaganda of the deed’ so successfully that some of the national media have discussed publicly their expertise in this endeavor” (4-5). Throughout their criminal investigations of AIM members and their stand-off at Wounded Knee, the FBI invoked metaphors of insurgency and military jargon in their internal documents and press releases. There were three important consequences to the FBI’s rhetorical approach to insurgency. First, it reflected a misunderstanding of AIM’s revival of the warrior tradition as a mode of activism based on community building through self-sacrifice as opposed to guerrilla bravado. Second, the metaphors of guerrilla warfare helped reenact a familiar scene of counterinsurgency, drawing from available interpretations of the changing nature of warfare both domestically and abroad in Vietnam. Feeling they were facing an insurgent force, the FBI deployed techniques of counterinsurgency, including infiltration of the organization, aggressive investigations to disrupt AIM’s activists networks, and counter-propaganda in press releases and media reports to inoculate Indian civilians against AIM’s message and diffuse potential sympathy in the non-Indian public. Finally, the application of such guerrilla warfare metaphors demonstrates the inner-workings of the migrating concept of savagery across contexts of insurgency to justify extreme measures in defense of civilization.

First, the FBI confused AIM’s warrior persona as guerrilla insurgency. Vast cultural differences between Indian and non-Indian culture resulted in what Deloria calls “re-Indianization,” or white culture’s divergent interpretation of Indian efforts to recover a romantic past (1971, 92). AIM’s tactic of occupation or land reclamation was a highly militant and symbolic act that reflected a historical warrior tradition practiced by American Indians in resistance to westward expansion in the nineteenth century. National Indian Youth Council co-founded, Mel Thom argued at the dawn of Indian activism in the 1960’s that “There was ‘a new Indian’ war.” (quoted in Steiner 1968, 27). Stan Steiner, who closely chronicled the rise of the Indian movement, elaborates as follows (1968, 27): “It fittingly had begun with the return of the warriors from ‘The War of the Whites.’ It was these warriors, disguised in their khaki fatigues, who had gone back to the villages of

their forefathers from the alien and urban battlefields.” The concept that the Indian wars of the nineteenth century were ongoing was a common metaphor used to shock Indians out of apathy. Thom contends that “The weakest link in the Indian’s defense is his lack of understanding of this modern-type war. Indians have not been able to use political action, propaganda, and power as well as their opponents” (quoted in Steiner 1968, 43). Thom explains that by modern warfare, he meant a transformation of warfare from direct military violence to the seemingly benevolent practices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For Thom and other emerging Indian activists such as Clyde Warrior, Richard Oakes, Russell Means, and Dennis Banks, the modern assault against Indians was direct against community solidarity and identity through practices such as “termination,” which sought to sever the federal government’s trust relationship with Indian nations and “relocation,” which lured Indians off reservations in promise of employment and assimilation. While the younger generation of Indian activists did not rule out the use of violence, their concept of warfare was based on defending and building Indian communities against assimilation and other practices that undermined self-determination. The new generation of 1960’s Indian activists was interested in alternatives to political reformism as opposed to the empirically losing proposition of direct military conflict against the federal government.

Occupation was a fitting practice given the movement’s disillusion with the political process, and even conventional social protest, to obtain self-determination. Sioux activist Dick McKenzie captured the new radical thinking and alienation that then dominated the consciousness of young Indian militants when he argued that “Kneel-Ins, Sit-Ins, Sleep-Ins, Eat-Ins, Pray-Ins, like the Negroes do won’t help us. We would have to occupy the government buildings before things would change” (quoted in Steiner 1968, 45). While critical of the movement’s inability to leverage the necessary legal arguments to justify the tactic, Deloria argues that occupations could have been used “as a symbolic and political expression of the more general problem of instituting a program of land restoration by the federal government” (1974, 38). As a result, Deloria suggests that occupations created fierce resistance to Indian militancy, thus, “try as they might, Indians could not convince the non-Indians of the logic or historical validity of their ideas” (1974, 24). The revival of what Thom called a warrior

tradition of resistance was mysterious and threatening to a non-Indian audience. Several rhetorical critics who analyze the American Indian Movement argue that contemporary non-Indian society had no frame of reference to interpret their militant message. Sanchez and Stuckey argue that AIM activists had to overwhelm the (2000, 126) “preconceived, stereotypical, and/or negative images concerning what it meant to be ‘American Indian.’” Richard Morris and Philip Wander argue that Euro-Americans fundamental misunderstanding of Indian experiences, cultures, and histories made it (1990, 166) “virtually impossible for them to achieve self-determination or establish a firm foundation for communicating with the dominant society.”

Infamous activist Leonard Peltier argues that non-Indian audiences did not understand the warrior tradition adopted by AIM: “We have to really start doing stuff: build community gardens, chop wood, hauling water. Whatever they needed doing because that’s what your responsibility is. Not just prancing around with a gun in your hand and thinking you’re showing everybody you’re tough. In our society that’s not a warrior role” (quoted in *Incident at Oglala* 1992). In his introductory history to the American Indian Movement, Jeremy Schneider (1976) contends that AIM members understood warriorism as a dedication of self-sacrifice for the community. While AIM constructed a pan-Indian ethos, their uptake of a generic warriorism reflected a strong Sioux presence. The rhetorical influence of Sioux, and other traditional warrior cultures, explains the movement’s heavy reliance on the imagery of famous warriors such as Geronimo, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull as a source of mobilization. Troy Johnson, Duane Champagne, and Joane Nagel explain that the movement (1997, 19) “drew selectively on many elements of Indian history, especially symbols of resistance.” Warriorism was mobilized by AIM leaders as a way to reconnect American Indians with a rich cultural history of resistance and survival. While I do not suggest that AIM was a pacifist victim of government repression, I argue that the cultural gap between Indian and non-Indian interpretations of the warrior tradition, alongside predominant discourses that linked militant self-determination to guerrilla warfare, rationalized interpretations of AIM as insurgents. While it is certainly the case that occupation was a confrontational and sometimes violent activity, AIM members contended that the warrior’s primary role was to build and defend their



community. Warriorism, however, was interpreted as either a primitive attachment to a romantic past or a violent call to arms. Deloria argues that the problem of warriorism, for AIM and Sioux culture alike, was that non-Indian audience lacked the proper lens through which to distinguish between the civilian and military role of the warrior. Deloria contends that “the fairly respectable thesis of past exploits in war, perhaps romanticized for morale purposes, became a demonic spiritual force all its own.” (1971, 91). While Indians recovered a romantic past, non-Indians audience redefined Indians “in terms that white men will accept, even if that means re-Indianizing them according to white man’s idea of what they were like in the past and should logically become in the future.” (1971, 92). For non-Indians, the concept of Indians “on the warpath” conjured up cultural images of tribal warriors raiding caravans and fighting the U.S. cavalry. Even worse, the only contemporary analogue of warrior culture in which warfare served a civilian and military function emanated from the U.S. war in Vietnam and the insurgent practices of the Viet Cong. The FBI argued that AIM’s warrior culture was a cover from crime and terrorism. Trimbach and Trimbach’s most recent exposé articulates the FBI’s perception of the rhetoric of resistance as a diversionary tactic from a violent criminal conspiracy. They argue that “invoking familiar themes of warrior bravery versus government oppression became a very effective means of diversion from matters of criminality” (7).

Second, with a belief they were in a guerrilla conflict situation, the FBI approached prosecuting the movement by the same rules of engagement as counterinsurgency. In their tactical response to the occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota the FBI, aided by news media covering of the event, reenacted an insurgency-counterinsurgency dialectic to interpret AIM’s confrontational politics. While they may have had the best intentions, the overwhelming display of law enforcement and military equipment throughout the occupation suggests a heightened and perhaps exaggerated threat perception on behalf of the FBI. The occupation of Wounded Knee began as a conflict between AIM affiliated traditionalists and the more conservative Oglala tribal government in early 1973. AIM had assembled at Pine Ridge to assist tribal members alleging corruption on the part of tribal chairman Richard Wilson. Residents alleged that in addition to embezzling tribal funds, Wilson was pliable to financial incentives from energy

corporations interested in non-petroleum energy resources including coal and uranium (Messerschmidt, 1983). In response to a growing AIM presence at Pine Ridge, Wilson asked for and received assistance from Federal Marshals, the FBI, and the BIA to contain an impending showdown. In an act of protest, a large group of AIM members and reservation residents held a press conference at the historic site of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre. On 27 February 1973, Wilson's personal security force (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), the FBI, the BIA, Federal Marshals, and other local law enforcement blockaded the group, marking the start of a four-month stand off at Wounded Knee. At the initial assembly at Calico Hall precipitating the blockade, Russell Means issued a defiant message to law enforcement: "The only two options open to the United State of American are 1) They wipe out the old people, women, children, and men, by shooting and attacking us. 2) They can negotiate our demands" (quoted in Akwesasne Notes 1974, 35). While the occupation may have been unforeseen, AIM members decided to stand their ground and occupy the hallowed site in defiance.

The resulting 71-day stand-off between AIM and law enforcement was a spectacle with corresponding displays of military force by both the FBI and AIM. During the occupation both sides exchanged gunfire resulting in the death of two AIM occupants and injuries to law enforcement, the occupants, and members of the local community. While AIM members possessed a cache of weapons to hold their ground, the corresponding display of force by law enforcement was spectacular. John Williams Sayer (1997), Fellow at the Institute of Legal Studies, offers evidence of the amount weaponry involved, including military supplies (1997, 146):

The equipment maintained by the military while in use during the siege included fifteen armored personal carriers, clothing, rifles, grenade launchers, flares, and 133,000 rounds of ammunition, for a total cost, including the use of maintenance personnel from the national guard of five states and pilot and planes for aerial photographs, of over half a million dollars.

In addition, journalist Steve Hendricks (2006) argues that armored personnel carriers and other equipment designed for use in combat, including two Air Force Phantom jets and three helicopters, were used throughout siege (132-133). In an unfortunate connection, the same

types of jets were used in combat missions in Vietnam. Hendricks, relying on Senate testimony, argues that Army Vice Chief of Staff Alexander Haig order military advisers to oversee the transfer of military equipment, train federal marshals to use grenade launchers, and oversee military protocol and rules of engagement with the occupants. While Smith and Warrior concur that there is strong evidence of indirect military involvement, they conclude it was more of a reactionary fear of violence than any sort of vast government conspiracy assert by AIM members with “fondness for rhetorical excess and an exaggerated sense of self-importance” (212-213). In fact, the military’s presence may have restrained law enforcement given that a Pentagon memorandum argues that “the seizure and holding of Wounded Knee poses no threat to the Nation” (Smith and Warrior 1996, 213).<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the restraint and professionalism of military advisers, the introduction of military props and staging of combat scenery at Wounded Knee contributed to a counterinsurgency framework in which it would have been reasonable, however distorted, for law enforcement agents to believe they were involved in a guerrilla conflict. An FBI teletype issued on 24 April 1975, comments on “the use of FBI, U. S. Marshals and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Police at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, during the period February 27-May 8, 1973, in a paramilitary law enforcement situation” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 250).<sup>2</sup> The teletype also identifies problems “in adapting to a paramilitary role” when confronting AIM at Wounded Knee (252). The document goes on to detail the military training and equipment provided to the FBI by the U.S. military including “Armored personnel carriers, M-16’s, automatic infantry weapons, chemical weapons, steel helmets, gas masks, body armor, illuminating flares, military clothing and rations” (ibid.). In light of such preparations, the FBI made adjustments to a new framework of de facto military counterinsurgency as opposed to law enforcement. The teletype in question also notes the need to make the military preparations less visible because “the use of Army troops against these Indians might be misinterpreted by the press” (ibid.). For the bureau, it was important to match the fire power of the “militants were in possession of an M-60 machine gun and AK-47s (Communist automatic assault rifles) which could result in heavy casualties” (253). The nature of the FBI changed after Wounded Knee due to the type of training required to deal with similar insurgent situations. Trimbach

and Trimbach reflect that “As much as the AIM leadership detested the FBI, they might have liked even less the idea that Wounded Knee spawned a whole new role for the Bureau” (2007, 272).

This context frames the FBI’s use of propaganda, informants, and agent provocateurs to win the hearts and minds of the Indian and non-Indian public as they made preparations to disrupt AIM’s operations. Starting at Wounded Knee through the trial of Leonard Peltier, the FBI created strong ties to the national press to counter media savvy AIM celebrities such as Russell Means. Trimbach and Trimbach argue that the bureau felt as if they had to recover their reputations against the force of the alleged “AIM/Media spin machine” (14). During the Wounded Knee stand-off, an FBI teletype reveals that the FBI altered the reports of KIXI radio reporter Clarence Daniels without his knowledge. An FBI teletype reads that McDaniels was “unaware that his stories are not being publicized in full or that the intelligence information and his tapes are being furnished [by] the FBI” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 247).<sup>3</sup> U.S. Marshals also successfully infiltrated the Wounded Knee occupant force by sending in a female agent disguised as a reporter (Burnette and Koster 1974, 58). For security reasons, the FBI restricted media access to blockaded areas, forcing reporters to rely on sources within the bureau. The FBI offered afternoon press releases about the occupation in Pine Ridge village that was miles from the occupation site. FBI generated press releases were the primary source of information for the public throughout the occupation and they generally reflected the FBI’s narrative about the events.

Third, the rhetoric of wartime savagery associated with insurgency and terrorism was used to describe AIM’s occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 through the trial of Leonard Peltier in 1976. As it had within other wartime contexts, the rhetoric served as a justification for extreme measures against the enemy. The FBI press releases described the AIM’s facilities, whether houses, tents, or run-down shacks as a “sophisticated bunker complex” masquerading as civilian targets.<sup>4</sup> A memorandum entitled “Law Enforcement on the Pine Ridge Reservation” argued that on Pine Ridge

There are pockets of Indian population which consist almost exclusively of American Indian Movement (AIM) members and their supporters on the Reservation. It is significant that in some of these AIM centers the residents have built bunkers which would literally require military assault forces if it were necessary to overcome resistance emanating from the bunkers.”<sup>5</sup>

The implication was that modest and disheveled rural homes and shacks were actually disguised military installations. Furthermore, using military responses were rationalized as an extreme, but perhaps necessary tactic if AIM provoked the FBI. Insurgents are barbaric because they do not obey the rules of engagement of civilized conflict. They use civilians as currency for partisan military resistance. A key component of insurgent warfare is that its participants blur the lines between civilian and military targets by hiding in seemingly innocuous places. Insurgents rely on the support of local communities to provide them with the necessary supplies to continue their resistance. In instances where it is not given freely by the community, the insurgent force holds to community hostage. While Pine Ridge was one of the poorest communities in America, the recent military experience in Vietnam demonstrated that in spite of a community's humble or bucolic exterior, paramilitary activity could be proceeding unnoticed. Trimbach and Trimbach argue that some of the agents deployed to Wounded Knee were well adapted to "their new role as sentries" because of their experience in Vietnam "helped to supply badly needed tactical operations knowledge" (105). The war-time imagery was not lost on the agents. The FBI's military framing justified the use of force against what may otherwise be interpreted as innocent civilian targets typically exempted from the rules of civilized conventional combat.

Corresponding images of savagery interpenetrated both American Indians and the Viet Cong. Savagery is a dialectical discourse, historically marshaled in defense of colonial ambitions and the expansion of Western civilization. The roots of savagery can be traced to initial European contact with American Indians in which the values of civilization were affirmed through conquest of savagery. Fergus Borderwich argues that (1996, 18) "in their apparent savagery, Indians dramatically underscored Euro-Americans' notions of civilization, while their repeated military defeats seem unchallengeable proof of the white man's technological and moral superiority." Robert Berkhofer (1978) argues that the presumption in Western culture of a uniform savagery, or a condition of arrested human development, gave rise to and vindicated teleological beliefs about the triumph and superiority of Western culture. The image of the frontier was the most important site at which savagery was transformed into civilization, a universal and teleological project of Westernization. The intellectual and cultural

imagery of the frontier myth is thus a migratory and ubiquitous discourse tied to overcoming savagery.

In the context of Vietnam, Ivie argues that administration officials relied on topoi of savagery “to construct the image indirectly through contrasting references to the adversary’s coercive, irrational, and aggressive attempts to subjugate a freedom-loving, rational, and pacific victim.” (1980, 284). The North Vietnamese were constructed as uninvited outside aggressors, committed to ideological uniformity, and savage acts of brutality and terrorism (Ivie 1987; Ivie 2005). While the image of savagery authorized some soldiers to psychologically distance themselves from atrocities committed against their Vietnamese enemy, the mirror image of the Viet Cong reflected back to American guerrillas in order to rationalize counterinsurgent responses to Indian militancy. Concomitant with law enforcements use of war-time imagery, the Vietnam metaphor did not go unnoticed by the occupants of Wounded Knee. In his book *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee*, Blackfoot activist and AIM member Woody Kipp (2004) argues that his experience at Wounded Knee reminded him of his own tour in Vietnam. Kipp argues that many Indian soldiers empathized with the Vietnamese because their “physical resemblance to the Vietnamese people” (35). He argues that later, during a gunfire exchange at Wounded Knee, while illuminated by military flares that he “realized the United States military was looking for me with those flares. I was the gook now” (126). Whether the connection is literal or figurative, intentional or accidental, AIM was constructed with a similar lexicon to the Viet Cong. As Kipp argues, the Viet Cong and AIM were mirror reflections of one another. The circulating image of the Viet Cong, and that of Indian savagery, provided the rhetorical resources for the FBI to construct and comprehend the actions of AIM.

Like the Viet Cong, AIM was argued to use Indian civilians as diversions, human shields, or conduits, willing or unwilling, for sustained warfare. The enemy hid their weapon caches in innocuous civilian spaces without concern for the danger posed to the community. A 2 February 1976 memorandum argues that AIM was “by force of arms taking a number of community residents as hostages” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 264).<sup>6</sup> Agent Durham argues that (4) “they have trampled the civil rights of Indians...citizens in the country” and that they had imposed a new form of imperialism on Indian Country

(8) “utilized to justify revolution and, in many cases, terrorism.” As outside agitators, AIM had allegedly distorted the will of the Indian people that had once authorized them to agitate on their behalf. They used the community to further their own revolutionary goals. The idea that AIM is an outside agitator justified the FBI’s presence at Pine Ridge as a way to liberate the local residents. Trimbach and Trimbach argue that AIM’s presence was uninvited and that “to most law-abiding Native Americans, however, the FBI was the only reason there were not more AIM-involved assaults and murders.” (9). For the FBI, AIM guerrilla warriors were willing to sacrifice the people they were supposedly liberating to further their violent objectives.

In addition to savagery and a callous concern for human life, it was important for the FBI to demonstrate the AIM guerrilla warriors were well-armed and poised to strike. A 4 May 1973 teletype argues the Wounded Knee occupants were looking to purchase “automatic weapons, bazookas, rocket launchers, hand grenades, land mines, and mortars” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 257).<sup>7</sup> When a Boston-based support group airlifted food and other supplies to the occupants, the FBI told the news media they had found “arms and ammunition” of which no evidence existed in the flight manifest (Zimmerman 1976). Like the Viet Cong funneling weapons through civilian surrogates, AIM was using humanitarian and philanthropic sources to conceal their guerrilla preparations. Sayer argues that during the trials of Dennis Banks and Russell Means for their part in the Wounded Knee occupation, the government described them as “renegades” and “insurgents” that did not speak on behalf of their people but rather their own political agenda (1997, 4). Durham, testified before Congress that Banks and Means planned and engaged in terrorist and guerilla activity that were “extremely violent and well funded.”(United States 1976, 5).

During the trial of AIM members Bob Robideau and Dino Butler for murder of two FBI agents in 1975 (later linked to Peltier in 1977) an FBI teletype warns of advanced guerrilla training. The document argues that a group of nearly 2,000 Dog Soldiers “who are Pro-American Indian Movement (AIM) members who will kill for advancement of AIM objectives, have been seen since the Wounded Knee, South Dakota [sic] . . . These Dog Soldiers allegedly are undergoing guerrilla warfare training experiences” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 278).<sup>8</sup> The teletype even

suggests the revival of nineteenth century Indian warfare in acts such as “sniping of tourists on interstate highways in South Dakota” and “burn farmers’ and shooting equipment” to be committed by Russell Means “Hit Men” (279). This language “reindianizes” AIM as nineteenth century warriors that circle and attack innocent wagon caravans as they cross the Great Plains. While such rhetoric invokes fear and terror, it also revives a type of tragic yet romantic savagery that, as Deloria argues is a by-product (1971, 91) “of the failure of a warrior people to become domesticated.” The separation of caricatures of civilized “law-abiding Indians” from the radical warriors holding onto an archaic and violent past highlighted the ongoing presence of savagery in Indian Country. The law-abiding Indians have assimilated and rationally embraced the tenets of Euro-American society while AIM mocks society’s laws and terrorizes those that desire the presence of civilization. While the FBI may have been unaware of their historical troubled language to describe what they considered a very real Indian threat, they participated in the rhetoric of savagery that has been traditionally marshaled as a justification for war from Western expansion in North America through the war in Vietnam. Given the movement’s conception of Western history, it is not surprising that many Indian activists did not greet the FBI as liberators. Suspicion of law enforcement and the U.S. military pervaded Indian Country. Many activists that had been shaped by their experience in Vietnam identified much more with their Vietnamese enemy than their fellow soldiers. Conversely, the FBI had been affected by experiences and imagery of Vietnam. For them, the lesson was that the conditions of modern warfare had become blurred and unconventional. They needed to adapt to their new role to carry out their mission. Whether the threat of AIM was real or perceived, the rhetoric of guerrilla warfare and its attendant savagery were the only available topoi for which the FBI to conceive of AIM and emergence of domestic radicalism.

## Conclusion

Agents Trimbach and Trimbach ultimately argue that there was little the FBI could do to save the residents of Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The agents make an ambivalent and haunting statement about losing the soul of Indian country to AIM (2007, 272):



No one wanted to admit it but, in the final analysis, the AIM leadership, not Justice Department officials, ran the show at Wounded Knee. And in a case of supreme irony, we had allowed the slow destruction of the village unfold before our eyes. It may sound like an old Viet Nam era cliché, but in order to “save the village,” the government had to let it be destroyed, house by house.

In an unfortunate choice of words, the agents reflect on an irony of the Vietnam War as applied to Indian Country. Upon the destruction of the village of Ben Tre, journalist Peter Arnett relayed an infamous and iconic quote from an unnamed officer arguing that “it became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it” (quoted in Martin 2006, 15). From the FBI’s perspective, the savagery of unconventional warfare that had migrated from foreign contexts left them with little option but to respond in kind to contain what they considered to be one of the most dangerous threat of their time. As the argument goes, the reckless actions of AIM forced the FBI to reluctantly make unsavory calculations to act in what they considered to be the best interests of the people of Indian Country and the nation as a whole.

While this essay has been highly critical of the FBI’s repression of AIM, I suggest neither malicious intent nor a vast conspiracy against AIM. While Trimbach and Trimbach suggest, their reputations have been dragged through the mud by liberal activists and opportunistic academics, their history of AIM is not sacrosanct, nor are their tactics beyond criticism. It may be the case that the Bureau had the best intentions, and its agents were good people. This essay, however, demonstrates the limitations of the FBI’s rhetoric to rationalize AIM’s activity as anything other than a communist conspiracy of guerrilla warriors. The FBI had a constrained cultural field from which to make threat assessments about AIM. The omnipresence of topoi concerning the chameleon of communist aggression from the Soviet Union to Vietnam, the blurred nature of unconventional warfare, the rise of radical domestic protest organizations, and cultural mythology about American Indians, created a limited rhetorical field for those charged with countering such threats. With limited resources of invention, the FBI constructed AIM as a savage criminal syndicate embodying an amalgam of the worst traits of America’s enemies: communists, terrorists, Viet Cong, and other revolutionaries. The rhetoric suggests that the FBI believed they were involved in an insurgent-counterinsurgent framework. As a result, they used methods of counterinsurgency, the rhetorical dimension of

which justified extreme responses to AIM. The FBI's response to AIM illuminates the features of rhetorical counterinsurgency: a technique of governance that utilizes public communication strategies and rhetorical venues to control the available interpretations of the social order. The collection of intelligence information, the use of agent provocateurs, close ties to the national press, the public performance of justified force, and the use of available topoi of savagery to interpret social unrest, worked synergistically to contain AIM. In the end, however, the FBI's wild fantasies of AIM revolution never came to pass. Simultaneously, AIM was unable to achieve any of their twenty point demands expressed during the Trail of Broken Treaties. While it may have been that AIM was unable to craft a palatable message to achieve their political goals, there were factors beyond their control that limited the reception of any radical political message. Material and rhetorical constraints doomed AIM's warrior culture to be approached with fear and misunderstanding. The FBI's investigation of AIM demonstrates the ambivalent position of Indians in America. To agitate for the political changes required for real justice, the return of ancestral lands stolen by a settler nation would require the radical upending of the existing political order and a massive redistribution of natural resources and land that would be unacceptable in even the most favorable political climates. The perceived line between agitation and insurgency is much thinner than we may realize. The most haunting conclusion critics can draw from the FBI's rhetoric is that if one insists they are in a war, they are.

## Notes

1. See also Norman Kempster, "Military Ran the Show, Restrained FBI at Wounded Knee Siege," *Washington Star*, 1 December 1975, A1.
2. FBI teletype, "The Use of Special Agents of the FBI in a Paramilitary Law Enforcement Operation in the Indian Country," 24 April 1975, reprinted in facsimile by Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 250-53).
3. Excerpt (title and date omitted) from FBI teletype, reprinted in facsimile by Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 247).
4. Tom Coll quoted in John Crewdson, "Two FBI Men Die, Indian Slain," *New York Times*, 27 June 1975, p. 1.
5. FBI memorandum, "Law Enforcement on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation," 6 June 1975, quoted in Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 263, 265).

6. FBI memorandum, "To: Director, FBI," 6 February 1976, reprinted in facsimile by Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 264). The title of the memorandum was redacted.

7. FBI memorandum, "To Acting Director: American Indian Movement," 4 May 1973, reprinted in facsimile by Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 257-59). The teletype alleges that money donated from entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. may be used to purchase advanced weaponry to use against the FBI.

8. FBI teletype, "American Indian Movement," 21 May 1976, reprinted in facsimile by Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 277-80).

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