

commissioner and people to come there, to give up some token, to give up some lineament. And now you got, you know, forty-three peoples in all, thirty-nine they say that got killed on the retaking, that's dead today.

• • •

The political prisoner and Native American activist Leonard Peltier was born on the Anishinabe/Chippewa Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. Moved by the treatment of indigenous peoples, Peltier joined the American Indian Movement (AIM) and in 1972 took part in the Trail of Broken Treaties. The protest, a response to the years of the United States breaking promise after promise in its treaties with Native peoples, culminated with the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C. Here is Peltier's account of the takeover.

Leonard Peltier on the Trail of Broken Treaties Protest (1999)⁷

In November 1972, we brought our grievances to Washington, D.C., in a mass demonstration for Indian rights. We called that cross-country march and demonstration the "Trail of Broken Treaties." It was our hope and intent to set up a series of wide-ranging meetings with government agencies to discuss a twenty-point spectrum of crucial issues, including an overhaul of the BIA, putting it under Indian control, and also the establishment of a commission to examine treaty violations by the U.S. government. What was to have been a peaceful meeting turned into an impromptu sit-in when government officials, reneging on their promises to see us, had BIA security guards try to oust us from the building. When the security guards started using strong-arm tactics on our women and Elders, the sit-in escalated into a tense confrontation.

We were not about to turn and run. The spirit of Crazy Horse was with us. We seized the BIA building right in the center of downtown Washington, allowed all employees to leave peaceably, and occupied it for five days—much to the outrage of the American public, who were, as usual, totally misinformed as to what had happened, or why. We were portrayed in the press as "thugs" and "hoodlums" and "violent militants." Yes, we "sacked" the BIA building, looking for—and finding in abundance—files that would reveal the government's duplicity in dealing with Indians. We piled up desks and anything else we could find to build barricades against the government's threatened assault. We broke sealed windows so that tear gas couldn't be used to suffocate us and force us out. The police themselves broke most of the lower-floor windows. Sure, some of the younger guys, infuriated by

the government's lies and brutal mistreatment, started just breaking things up. We quickly put a stop to that. I remember Clyde Bellecourt announcing that, for every broken window in the BIA building, there were ten thousand hearts the BIA had broken in Indian country. He should have said a hundred thousand, even a million—that would have been nearer the mark.

One old Grandfather, a victim of the BIA throughout his life, took a fire ax, jumped up on the BIA commissioner's big mahogany desk, and split it in two! He laughed and wept ecstatically all the while, singing his death song as he chopped. "There . . . take *that* . . . and *that* . . . and *that*!" he cried between his gasps and his chants, righting an ancient wrong with every blow. It was beautiful. He was Crazy Horse incarnate at that moment.

Outside, the police and SWAT teams were gathered. If they wanted a bloodbath, we were prepared to give them one. We were ready to rain down desks and typewriters and filing cabinets and Molotov cocktails if they stormed the building. Some of the warriors put on their war paint. Every one of us was Crazy Horse. Seeing our resolve, the government itself had second thoughts. Murder four hundred Indians in a massacre a few blocks from the White House only days before the 1972 presidential election? No way. The FBI decided to end this thing for the moment, then hunt us down later one by one, which, indeed, is exactly what they did. That's when my name, as a security chief during the BIA takeover, appeared high on their list of secret targets as an "AIM agitator" and "key extremist." I'd already been arrested during the Fort Lawton take-over. I was permanently marked.

The government finally started negotiating with us, but only to end the occupation of the BIA building, not to resolve our original twenty-point list of grievances. We felt we'd made at least one point—that point being that *we exist!* We'd proven that. The government promised to look into our grievances (they never did) and they also promised not to prosecute us for the BIA takeover (a promise broken like all the others). We didn't believe them anyway. To defuse the situation and end their own embarrassment, they actually provided vehicles and an early-morning police escort out of town plus under-the-table money to pay our return travel expenses. Some of the Elders even received first-class tickets back home! The government thought they were sweeping us once more under the rug.

But this time we were not about to be swept.

• • •

The mid-1970s saw a general disillusionment in the nation with the president, the Congress, and government agencies like the FBI and the CIA. Part of this was a reaction to the Vietnam War, part a reaction to the "Watergate" scandal of President Nixon, whose men staged a break-in to the Democratic Party's National Committee