

Prelude to June 26, 1975:

Terror on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation

Prevailing Attitude of the Day

As Norman Zigrossi, then Special Agent in charge of the South Dakota (SD) office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) put it, the American Indians are a "conquered nation... and when you're conquered, the people you're conquered by dictate your future." Consequently, the FBI must function as a "colonial police force." (Rolling Stone, 7 April 1977, p. 52)

February 27, 1973—Members of American Indian Movement (AIM), together with local and traditional Native Americans, began their 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee to protest injustices against their tribes, violations of the many treaties with the United States government, and the repression of Indigenous people. The FBI began to enter and become obtrusively established on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Tensions increased when 63 U.S. Marshals were assigned to the reservation, joining an undisclosed number of FBI agents.



Throughout the next three years—long referred to by local Native Americans as the "Reign of Terror"—the FBI carried out intensive local surveillance, as well as repeated arrests, harassment and bad faith legal proceedings, against AIM leaders and supporters. The FBI also closely collaborated with and supported the corrupt tribal chairman, Dick Wilson, and his vigilantes—the Guardians Of the Oglala Nation (GOONs)—providing intelligence, weapons, and ammunition.



During this "Reign of Terror," some 64 local Native Americans were murdered. The murder rate between March 1, 1973, and March 1, 1976, was 170 per 100,000; it was the highest in the country. Three hundred additional persons were harassed, beaten, or otherwise abused. The FBI had jurisdiction to investigate major crimes. These deaths were never adequately investigated. The FBI agents also failed to take any measures to curb the violence of the GOONs.



April 24, 1975—About two months before the fatal shootout, government documents show that the FBI completed a chilling study on its preparedness to conduct "paramilitary operations" on the reservation. Donald Holman, SD Criminal Justice Commission: "Every law enforcement agency in the state... [has] formed units [that] have two things in common. The first is that they all practice military tactics... The second is that they were all formed for the same purpose, namely the suppression of Indian uprisings."



Late May 1975—Within a month, a build-up of FBI personnel occurred in and around the reservation, mostly Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT-) trained agents. The FBI also began training a 10-man Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) SWAT team.



June 5, 1975—A FBI memorandum noted that there were pockets of AIM members and supporters on the reservation. The FBI also falsely claimed "bunkers" had been built by AIM (in fact, they were mounds of earth on the side of a hill) in preparation for a frontal assault and which "would literally require military assault forces if it were necessary to overcome resistance emanating from the bunkers."



June 16, 1975—The FBI again supplemented its manpower by ordering special agents into SD for a temporary 60-day period. The build up of FBI agents, possibly as many as 60 FBI agents, on or near the Pine Ridge Reservation, and the presence of a SWAT unit (which spent a considerable amount of its time "practicing assaults on houses") added to an already very tense situation.



June 25, 1975—A GOON fired a rifle near a pond close to the Jumping Bull property and was chased away by an AIM member. A group of AIM members had set up a tent camp southeast of the Jumping Bull house in early June 1975. The previous 7-10 days were extremely violent ones on the reservation. Tensions ran high on all sides.



June 26, 1975—FBI agents Coler and Williams entered the Jumping Bull Ranch. They allegedly sought to arrest a young Indian man accused of stealing a pair of cowboy boots. For an unknown reason a shootout occurred. According to witnesses, prior to the first shot being fired, medical personnel at the nearby BIA hospital were summoned to the emergency department and told to prepare for the arrival of body bags; and roadblocks had already been set up close to the Jumping Bull property. When the firefight occurred, the property was quickly surrounded by over 150 FBI agents, SWAT team members, BIA police, and local vigilantes. When the firefight was over, the two agents and an Indian man were dead.

Who Are the Terrorists?

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