

■ American Indian Movement—National Operational Goal

Date: ca. 1974

Author: Dennis Banks

Genre: Charter

Summary Overview

The highest profile group working for civil rights for American Indian peoples during the late 1960s and 1970s was the American Indian Movement (AIM). From its beginnings among Native men in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area in 1968 to its well-known protests during the early 1970s, AIM became a lightning rod both in the American Indian communities across the United States and in the nation as a whole. Though not all Indians agreed with AIM's approach, which basically consisted of an emphasis on Indian ways of life and thought and a concurrent turn away from the rest of American society, they, more than any other group, became the symbol of the Red Power Movement—demanding more than just the reform of what they saw as a corrupt Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), but calling for complete self-determination for all American Indian nations. By 1974, AIM leaders conceived a vision of what they thought the future of the movement, and of Indian people as a whole, should be.

Defining Moment

By the late 1960s, many minority groups saw in the African American civil rights movement a model for the liberation of their own peoples. Consequently, a number of movements trace their origins to this time period, including the Chicano movement, the Feminist movement, and the Red Power Movement. At the forefront of the Red Power Movement was AIM, a group founded by urban Indians, many of whom had spent time in prison and knew the discrimination and brutality faced by many Indians across the nation. AIM was different from many other Indian groups, as they saw many of the tribal governments on the reservation as corrupt and in league with the federal government, to the detriment of American Indian people.

Taking their cue from the civil rights movement, AIM sought public attention for their cause by staging a series of high-profile protests and demonstrations during the first half of the 1970s. On Thanksgiving Day 1970,

AIM protesters occupied the replica of the Pilgrims' ship, *Mayflower*, anchored in Plymouth Harbor, Massachusetts. In the autumn of 1972, AIM organized the Trail of Broken Treaties—a protest that began in San Francisco in October, and traveled across the nation from reservation-to-reservation, gaining people as it went. By the time the protest reached Washington, D.C., in early November, it was a four-mile long caravan of cars from all over the country. The point of the protest was to present the Nixon administration with a twenty-point program to reform Indian country, but the federal government refused to receive the document. Undeterred, between 500 to 600 AIM protesters seized the Bureau of Indian Affairs building on November 3, occupying it until November 9, and only ending when the Nixon Administration agreed to discuss all of the twenty points.

After leaving Washington, D.C., much of the leadership of AIM, including Russell Means and Dennis Banks, went to South Dakota, in order to protest the corrupt chairman of the Pine Ridge Reservation Tribal Council, Dick Wilson. Wilson had banned AIM from Pine Ridge and had established his own paramilitary group, named the "Guardians of the Oglala Nation" (called "goons" by AIM members). After Wilson had Means and Banks arrested, over 200 AIM members protested at the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre and were surrounded by FBI agents, federal marshals, and BIA police. The siege lasted from February until May 1973, with periodic exchanges of gunfire between protesters and federal agents that left two of the AIM protesters dead. Though the Wounded Knee incident might have been considered the end of the first era of the Red Power movement, AIM continued to advocate for Indian people and was treated by the FBI and other federal agencies as a subversive organization.

Author Biography

Dennis Banks was born a member of the Anishinaabe tribe on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota in 1932. As a boy, Banks was removed from his home on the reservation and sent to a BIA boarding school, where he and the other students were stripped of their Indian cultures and forbidden to use Indian languages. Shortly after completing a prison sentence for burglary in 1968, he, along with Russell Means, founded AIM. Collaborating with Means, Banks coordinated many of the early mass protests in which AIM participated, and

he was also among the “Indians of All Tribes” that occupied the former federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay for nineteen months during 1969–1971. Banks was arrested after AIM’s occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 and was convicted of assault and inciting a riot, though he avoided arrest, being granted amnesty in first California and then on New York’s Onondaga Reservation until 1985, when he surrendered and served eighteen months in prison. He remains an influential Indian leader, has written two books, and has acted in a number of motion pictures.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT, INC.

1500 PACIFIC BOULEVARD
VENICE, CALIFORNIA 90291
CONFIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM

TO: Doug Durham—Administration
FROM: D. J. Banks, National Executive Director
SUBJECT: Operational Goal of National AIM

Here is a brief outline that should lead to the establishment of some working guidelines that the Staff should be introduced to.

While it is a working draft of our objectives, no attempt to de-classify the security placed on it should develop. Caution should be employed while reviewing its contents. Careful interpretation of its meaning is necessary; i.e., 5.0 (D) (E) (F); possible Program Objectives of AIM.

I will also expect to see visible changes that are reflective of this guide.

No part of this guide is to be reproduced without the explicit and the physical authority of the National Executive Director...

5.0 POSSIBLE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES OF AIM

In general the overall policy of national AIM can be summarized as follows: ...to free Indian people throughout the Americas from white man’s oppression and racism so as to create free Indian states that reflect self determination of free peoples . . .

The translation of the above into workable objectives

could be realized by the following programs:

- A) Dissolution of the BIA.
- B) Establishment of the free Indian Congress.
- C) Re-establishment of reservation sovereignty and self determination.
- D) Establish and conduct negotiations with all nations of the world for free trade and economic relations.
- E) Develop complete social services system for Indian peoples on reservation complexes centered on Indian economic system utilizing fundamental Indian lands and resources as an economic base.

In order to accomplish the above goals many additional sub tasks must be brought to fruition which include but are not limited to:

- A) Creation of health care facilities and programs.
- B) Abolishment of all destructive practices from Indian peoples such as alcohol and drugs.
- C) Develop and implement national Indian school system, Indian culture taught by Indians. (This does not exclude positive technical values from other cultures.)
- D) Creation of Indian land states as part of the Indian Congress.
- E) Establishment of trade tariffs and interface with surrounding countries in the world.
- F) Creation of a judicial system that is based on Indian culture and mores.

The above long range goals can be assisted by planning and implementing the following short term realizable objectives:

1. Establish AIM Center (National).

2. Raise substantial capital, i.e., 10–20 million dollars.

3. Establish liaison and coordination with other groups in this country that share similar views so that interaction will be greatly optimized.

4. Creation of AIM chapters in every city, reservation, university or wherever there are more than 10 Indians that can be galvanized into an operating chapter.

5. Formulate and distribute operating manuals that will enable creation of effective local chapters with minimum difficulties.

6. Establish international coordination....

7.0 RAILROAD OPERATIONS

As AIM matures the need for a realistic “railroad” system will come more to the fore. Until such time as the reservations revert to sovereign states there will be increasing difficulty for Indian warriors to freely move in the execution of their appointed tasks. To alleviate this problem it is suggested that each AIM chapter of 20 or more members maintain a “safe place” (SP). The SP could be anyone’s home, garage, etc. In order to provide maximum visibility each member of the chapter could be responsible for handling and maintaining traveling warriors or groups on a rotating basis. The AIM chapter leader would maintain the single point of contact for all incoming and outgoing people. Each chapter should provide basic staples only to visitors. These staples should include food and lodging and absolutely no drugs, alcohol or other illegal items.

Transportation should be provided by whomever is responsible for the visitors. Transportation should consist of in-town trips.

In order to effect movements of material and people with minimum risk it is suggested that chapters meet visitors half way between the nearest chapter that the visitors are coming from. In that way “long haul” out of state vehicles, etc. will not be observed thus lowering visibility of movement. Once AIM chapters are established across the country AIM Center can assume full coordination with warrior movements.

Local chapters will receive, report and maintain status on personnel movements via AIM center communications. This facility will accomplish several goals:

A) Security: Central will validate identities and personnel.

B) Control: Central will know at all times where personnel are located.

C) Involvement: Local chapters will be contacted continually thus allowing more information exchange, news, directives, etc.

In major cities where AIM chapters will be of considerable strength apartments or houses could be rented and continually changed for use of traveling people. This would be practical if there were large numbers of people at a given location for a specific purpose at a given time. However, the need for these SP’s must be developed as experience dictates.

8.0 MEDIA RELATIONS

Perhaps the most important element in AIM operations will be media relations. This function logically lies in AIM central however, local chapters must participate at the “grass roots” level. AIM must create the post of “press secretary,” “minister of propaganda” or whatever is deemed suitable. The role of this single point will be the dissemination of information to the press which includes foreign and domestic outlets.

The press secretary should accomplish the following initial tasks:

A) Conduct a national and world wide inventory of media outlets so as to develop a master index of all valid media contacts.

B) Differentiate this master index into national, international and local outlets.

C) Assign local outlets to local AIM chapters.

D) Develop the necessary machinery, equipment and procedures to effect a national and international press release or conference.

E) Develop the necessary capability to prepare video tape coverage of AIM events and other activities for release to key media outlets.

F) Create the image, in the media, that will be determined by the national leadership council or board.

The media function within AIM national will also regulate the flow of communications to all chapters as well as outside agencies or other groups. The media function shall be responsible to create “How To” books for local chapters so that they too can learn to use the media as a basic tool....

12.0 SCHOOL SYSTEM

A major objective of the movement is to regain the

young. Once the BIA is eliminated and individual tribal states are created schools will not be a major problem. However, until such times as this goal is realized AIM must plan, support and execute the following school activities:

1. Prepare and release to local AIM chapters a “how to manual” for founding an Indian school.
2. Since most behavior characteristics are learned within the first 5 years AIM should begin with pre-school and elementary education programs.
3. The manual should delineate the following points required to establish a school:

A) Determine best location for school based on Indian population distribution.

B) Determine basic modular minimum for number of teachers, facilities, etc.

C) Prepare proposals and seek federal monies for support of Indian educational programs.

D) Conduct recruiting for Indian teachers at all universities throughout the United States. (AIM National Center task)

E) Form whatever is best organizational form, i.e., 501C3 tax-exempt, non-profit corporation.

F) AIM National Center to provide basic teaching aids such as reading, cultural materials and lore....

Document Analysis

Coming off of their large-scale protests, during the early and mid-1970s the American Indian Movement would begin to combine cultural and social goals with their political purposes, and these types of ambitions feature prominently in AIM cofounder and national executive director Dennis Banks’s letter outlining the operational goals of the movement. Banks identified the objectives outlined in the document as a “visible change” from being a protest movement to becoming a group that sought “to free Indian people throughout the Americas from white man’s oppression and racism so as to create free Indian states that reflect self determination of free peoples.”

According to Banks, the only way for American Indians to truly exercise self-determination in the long term was by extricating themselves from the system of dependency that had characterized the relationship between the tribes and the federal government since the late nineteenth century. To that end, he called for the dissolution of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the establishment of an Indian Congress, and the development of political and economic systems that were not derived from the model of the United States, but rather those that originated from Indian peoples and cultures. Self-determination, to Banks, was much more than simply having limited decision-making power given to the tribes by the federal government. Rather, what AIM sought was more akin to complete independence, which included the Indian nations handling their own relationships with foreign nations. Though Banks saw the need for technical skills derived from the outside world, he asserted that the abolition of alcohol and drug use among Indians was

an important part of them creating the cultural utopia he envisioned.

Though AIM’s long-term goal was to establish Indian sovereignty, the short-term goals needed to accomplish the group’s larger ambitions were much more pragmatic. These included expanding AIM both nationally and locally by establishing chapters anywhere there were ten or more Indian people, raising approximately \$10–20 million, creating materials that would ensure that all of the chapters were working toward the same goals, and coordinating with other Indigenous peoples around the world.

On a tactical basis, Banks advocated for the creation of a network of safe houses akin to the “Underground Railroad,” which would shelter and provide for AIM “warriors” who were traveling. Also, each chapter was to pursue a media strategy coordinated with national AIM to demonstrate unity and purpose. Finally, a school system was to be established so that young Indians could be brought up in an atmosphere that emphasized Indian values. Banks’s operational goals represented an ambitious look at what he hoped would be the future of American Indian peoples and one that could only be carried out by a national group such as AIM.

Essential Themes

Though Banks and other AIM leaders looked toward a utopian vision of independent Indian nations, the situation in the nation during the 1970s did not allow that vision to take hold. After AIM’s high-profile protests during the early part of the decade, the FBI expanded its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) to include

AIM. More than thirty AIM leaders were later indicted on charges of grand larceny and arson stemming from the 1972 BIA occupation. After his reelection, President Nixon formally rejected all twenty points that AIM had proposed for the reform of the BIA. AIM, however, was hugely successful in bringing Indian rights to the national agenda.

Throughout the 1970s and after, AIM continued to agitate for Indian rights, although with a lower profile. In 1979, national AIM was discontinued, and the movement transformed into a collection of local movements, AIM chapters have pursued both protests and litigation to protect the treaty rights guaranteed to various American Indian nations. Although gaining some social acceptance today, Indians are still the most poverty-stricken minority group, and AIM has established countless programs to address destitution and hunger among both urban and reservation Indians.

Although AIM leaders such as Dennis Banks, Russell Means, and Clyde Bellecourt retained a high profile among American Indians as well as others who saw the positive aspects of their movement, probably the best known and longest lasting symbol of AIM's activities during the 1970s is Leonard Peltier, who was convicted in 1977 of the killing of two FBI agents two years earlier, during the conflict at Pine Ridge. Claiming that he did not receive a fair trial, many view Peltier as a political prisoner, and this view has made him a *cause célèbre* among many. The FBI's refusal to release over 6,000 pages of documentation regarding Peltier has only fanned the flames. Peltier has remained in federal custody ever since his conviction.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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