Early in the morning on November 20, 1969, 79 American Indians, including students, married couples and six children, sailed to Alcatraz and began the 19-month occupation of the island. Despite the Coast Guard's attempted blockade, the group disembarked successfully.

**THIS LAND IS MY LAND**

*Mayday! Mayday! The Indians have landed.*

Glenn Dodson, Alcatraz caretaker

The island's caretaker, Glenn Dodson (who said he was one-eighth Indian), advised the group that they were trespassing and then directed them to the island's most comfortable housing, a frame house that was once the warden's residence. There they set up their headquarters and celebrated a successful landing with a victory powwow and ceremonial singing.

The Coast Guard set up another blockade around the island to prevent supplies and people from getting through. Late that afternoon, a GSA regional administrator, lawyers representing the Indian occupiers and a Department of the Interior representative arrived. The government gave them 24 hours to leave, but the occupiers didn't budge. The group's leader Richard Oakes phoned in a message to the San Francisco Department of the Interior office:

"We invite the United States to acknowledge the justice of our claim. The choice now lies with the leaders of the American government - to use violence upon us as before to remove us from our Great Spirit's land, or to institute a real change..."
in its dealing with the American Indian. We do not fear your threat to charge us with crimes on our land. We and all other oppressed peoples would welcome spectacle of proof before the world of your title by genocide. Nevertheless, we seek peace."

**THE DEMANDS**

The occupiers' list of demands included the return of Alcatraz to the American Indians and sufficient funding to build, maintain and operate an Indian cultural complex and a university. Though the government agreed to negotiate, they rejected all of the demands the occupiers proposed.

Fearing that the occupation could be mishandled and violence would ensue, President Nixon's special counsel Leonard Garment issued orders to the GSA that his office would take over the government's Alcatraz policy.

The occupiers organized themselves immediately, electing a council and giving everyone a job. Everyone on the island voted on all major decisions. Within three weeks of the occupation, a school was set up. Older adults taught traditional native arts and crafts such as bead and leather work, woodcarving, costume decoration, sculpture, dance and music.

**UN-TA**

Several days later, on Thanksgiving Day, hundreds of Native Americans and their supporters came to Alcatraz to celebrate a day of victory and to express their renewed pride in Indian identity.

In December 1969, occupier John Trudell began daily broadcasts from the island to KPFA/Berkeley and KPFK/Los Angeles. The following month, occupiers published the *Indians of All Tribes* newsletter and distributed it across the country. The activists received monetary support, food and supplies from businesses and private citizens. Joseph Morris, a member of the local longshoreman's union and a Blackfoot Indian, rented space on Pier 40 and turned it into a center where supplies and people were ferried to Alcatraz.

The occupiers also had strong support from the entertainment industry. Sports legend Jim Thorpe's (Sac and Fox) daughter Grace, who occupied the island for several months, acted as a liason to celebrities like Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Jonathan Winters and Dick Gregory, who visited to show their solidarity with the Indian occupation. The rock band Creedence Clearwater Revival donated $15,000 to the cause.

The federal government, taking its cue from strong public support of the Indians and favorable media coverage, met with the occupiers several times on the island. The occupiers held their ground on demands, and the government played a

http://www.pbs.org/itvs/alcatrazisnotanisland/occupation.html
waiting game in the hopes that conditions would get too uncomfortable to make Alcatraz habitable.

**CHALLENGES**

As time went on, the island became an increasingly difficult place to live. On December 4, Alcatraz lost all electrical power and the GSA disconnected incoming phone calls. Both the primary water main and the fuel line were leaking. Many of the original occupiers were students, and some went back to college in order to keep their scholarships and loans. Some of the new occupiers were less idealistic, and others had addiction problems. Some non-Indians from the San Francisco drug and hippie culture moved onto the island. To make matters worse, leadership struggles on the island increased, as some groups resented the media attention that Richard Oakes received.

**TRAGEDY ON ALACRAZ**

On January 3, 1970, Richard Oakes's 13-year old stepdaughter Yvonne fell onto a concrete slab and died almost immediately. A few days after she passed away, Oakes and his family left the island for good, creating a leadership void and a power struggle among the remaining occupiers.

Then a negotiating team from Washington arrived on Alcatraz. Proposals and counterprosals passed between the government and the occupiers during March, April and May 1970, yet there were no concessions on either side. The Native Americans held to their desire to hold the deed to Alcatraz Island. In late May, the government cut off the remaining electrical power and telephone service to the island and removed the water barge.

**PUBLIC OPINION TURNS**

In June 1970, a fire on the island destroyed the warden's quarters, the doctor's quarters and the inside of the lighthouse. Government officials blamed the occupiers, and the occupiers said a group of whites had slipped past their security after dark and set the fire.

On July 8, 1970, President Nixon announced a new policy of "self-determination without termination" for Native Americans. "It is long past time that the Indian policies of the federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities of the Indian people," he said. The government again decided not to remove the remaining occupiers.

Because the lack of electricity meant that the lighthouse and fog signals were inoperable, the public became concerned about navigation safety. When the Coast Guard went to restore the navigational aids, they were met by island occupants with weapons, who would not allow a repair crew on the island unless the Coast Guard restored the water. When a two and a half foot long arrow with a metal tip struck a crowded harbor excursion boat, public opinion turned against the occupiers, as they were perceived as potentially violent. The press began publishing stories of beatings and assaults on the island, and support for the occupiers eroded even further.

**THE FINAL STRAW**

http://www.pbs.org/itvs/alcatrazisnotanisland/occupation.html
In mid-January 1971, two supertankers collided near the Golden Gate Bridge, dumping 800,000 gallons of crude oil into the ocean. Although the fact that the lighthouse had broken down was not a factor in the accident, the media and public withdrew their support even more. The conditions on the island got worse, as the occupiers were left with no fresh water, little electrical power and a small amount of food.

On June 11, 1971, a large force of federal marshals, GSA Special Forces, Coast Guard and FBI agents removed the final 15 people - six men, four women and five children - from Alcatraz. They offered no resistance, and after 19 months and nine days, the occupation was over.

The purpose of occupying Alcatraz was to start an Indian movement and call attention to Indian problems.... It has served its purpose. Look at the gains Indians have made since. I don't want to say Alcatraz is done with, but no organized Indian groups are active there. It has turned from an Indian movement to a personality thing. When we occupied the island, we caught the government, then our occupation forces caught us.

Adam Fortunate Eagle, San Francisco Chronicle interview, 1971