Before AIM [American Indian Movement], Indians were dispirited, defeated and culturally dissolving. People were ashamed to be Indian. You didn't see the young people wearing braids or chokers or ribbon shirts in those days. Hell, I didn't wear 'em. People didn't Sun Dance, they didn't Sweat, they were losing their languages. Then there was that spark at Alcatraz, and we took off. Man, we took a ride across this country. We put Indians and Indian rights smack dab in the middle of the public consciousness for the first time since the so-called Indian Wars.... [AIM] laid the groundwork for the next stage in regaining our sovereignty and self-determination as nation, and I'm proud to have been a part of that.

- Russell Means (Oglala Lakota)

The takeover of Alcatraz was one of the most successful American Indian protest actions of the 20th century, fueling the rise of modern Native American activism. In fact, many of the 74 Indian occupations of federal facilities that followed Alcatraz were either planned by or included people who had been involved in seizing the island. The occupation also brought Indian rights issues to the attention of the federal government and American public, changing forever the way Native people viewed themselves, their culture and their inherent right to self-determination.

The occupation also succeeded in getting the federal government to end its policy of termination and adopt an official policy of Indian self-determination. From 1970 to 1971, Congress passed 52 legislative proposals on behalf of American Indians to support tribal self-rule. President Nixon increased the BIA budget by 225 percent, doubled funds for Indian health care and established the Office of Indian Water Rights. Also during Nixon's presidency, scholarship funds were increased by $848,000 for college students. The Office of Equal Opportunity provided more funds for economic development and drug and alcohol recovery programs and expanded housing, health care and other programs.
After visiting the occupiers on Alcatraz Island, the American Indian Movement (AIM) began a series of national protest actions by seizing federal facilities. Comprised of mostly younger, more progressive and better educated urban Indians, AIM was initially formed to protect urban Indians from civil rights abuses. Inspired by the Alcatraz occupation, AIM became an important multi-tribal protest organization during the '70s. Its first protest action was on Thanksgiving Day 1970, when AIM members painted Plymouth Rock red and seized the Mayflower II replica in Plymouth, Massachusetts to challenge a celebration of colonial expansion.

From the takeover of Alcatraz Island in 1969 to the Longest Walk in 1978, the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement (ARPM) used social protest to demand that the government honor treaty obligations by providing resources, education, housing and healthcare to alleviate poverty. The ARPM aimed to build Indian colleges and create Indian studies programs, museums and cultural centers with federal funds to redress centuries of cultural repression.

Although Native Americans had participated in social movements throughout the 20th century, the ARPM differed from past movements in that they demanded inclusion in U.S. institutions while retaining their cultural identity. As Indian activism progressed, the Red Power movement became more serious and sometimes violent. In November 1972, several Native rights organizations staged the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan on the eve of the 1972 presidential election with the intention of presenting President Nixon with a 20-point program redefining U.S.-Indian relations. Angered by the lack of logistical support promised by Interior Department officials, Native American activists took over BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., taking vast numbers of confidential files concerning the BIA and Indian Health Service (IHS) and inflicting $2.2 million in damage to the building. Embarrassed by the media coverage, the Nixon Administration promised to respond to their demands within a month and gave them $66,000 in transportation money immediately in exchange for a peaceful end to the occupation.

After 1972, the expanding protests of urban Indian groups spread to the reservations and revealed increasing tensions within Indian communities, often characterized as "traditional" versus "assimilated" Indians. These conflicts came to a head at "Wounded Knee II," a ten-week siege on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The conflict at Wounded Knee involved the impeachment of Oglala Lakota (Sioux)’s tribal chairman, Richard Wilson, who was considered corrupt by many elders and traditional members of the tribe, including those associated with AIM. Other tribe members, many of whom were family members and friends who had received the few jobs and resources the tribal government had to offer, supported Wilson. The two opposing factions armed themselves and a standoff ensued, involving tribal police, AIM, people living on the reservation, federal law enforcement officials, the BIA, celebrities, philanthropic, religious and legal
organizations, the U.S. military and the news media. The siege ended May 9 after negotiations between President Nixon's representative Leonard Garment and AIM leaders Dennis Banks and Carter Camp. During the standoff, two Native Americans and one FBI agent were killed. Wilson remained in office. In the next few years, numerous occupations occurred on reservations involving tribal factions associated with AIM or urban tribal members.

The last major event of the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement was The Longest Walk from February to July 1978. Several hundred Native Americans marched from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. to symbolize the forced removal of American Indians from their homelands and to draw attention to the continuing problems plaguing the Indian community. The march also attempted to call attention to backlash against Indian treaty rights that was gaining momentum in Congress. Unlike many protest events of the mid-'70s, the walk was a peaceful event.

The Alcatraz-Red Power Movement declined in the late '70s, due in large part to the FBI's suppression and infiltration through its then secret operation COINTELPRO, which sought to "neutralize" any activist organization with strong dissenting views against the federal government. Within three years of the Wounded Knee II siege, 69 members and supporters of AIM died violently on the reservation. Nearly 350 others were physically assaulted. None of their killers were convicted, and many of the cases were never investigated. Many AIM leaders were imprisoned. Divisions within AIM revealed a split in the movement between those who fought for the rights of the urban Indian community and others who favored a national activist agenda. After 1978, the tactic of property seizures fell out of favor, signaling the end of Red Power activism.

But the Red Power movement accomplished many of its goals. By the early 1980s, over 100 Indian studies programs had been created in the United States. Tribal museums opened, and the United Nations recognized an international indigenous rights movement. AIM continued fighting for Indian rights in land and grazing rights battles; protesting athletic team Indian mascots; and working for the repatriation of sacred objects taken from Indian land.

Every November since 1975, Indian people have gathered on Alcatraz Island on what is called "Un-Thanksgiving Day" to honor the occupation and those who continue to fight for Native American rights today.