

States of the Union

RETURN TO WOUNDED KNEE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



PINE RIDGE, S D

THE OLD, barefoot Indian has been watching me from across the road for some time. Finally, he shuffles over. His first question does not surprise me, his second one does.

"Say, mister, can you help me out? I haven't eaten all day."

I give him a quarter.

"Listen," he says, biting the quarter, "do you mind if I ask you something? Are you an FBI man?"

The questions neatly summarize social and political conditions on this benighted reservation, home to

a few thousand Oglala Sioux. Six months after the Wounded Knee demonstrators surrendered here to U.S. marshals, Pine Ridge remains a sinkhole of poverty, alcoholism and fratricide. That is nothing new; the Oglala Sioux have been in deep depression, both economic and spiritual, ever since their leader Crazy Horse was murdered in 1877 by Indian guards employed by the U.S. Army.

What is new, in the wake of Wounded Knee, is the Justice Department's apparent determination to destroy the so-called "Indian revolution," a movement to be found inside a few persons' heads (young Indians, old law enforcers) but nowhere on the Western plain. Chief spokesman for the revolution, and therefore chief target of the Justice Department, is the American Indian Movement (AIM), which organized the Wounded Knee demonstration, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Washington sit-in last November and a series of less notorious uprisings.

More than 100 AIM members, including six of their national leaders, are under Federal indictment for al-

leged felonies ranging from burglary to conspiracy to commit murder. All the indictments are related to the Wounded Knee episode, a demonstration that lasted nearly three months and was marked by two gunshot deaths, several serious injuries and an epidemic of arson around the countryside.

The six indicted leaders will be tried in St. Paul, Minnesota, early next year. Whether the government has a solid case, as Justice spokesmen insist, or whether it is simply indulging its distaste for dissent, as it was in the vendettas against Spock, Ellsberg and the Brothers Berrigan, will be decided in the courts. But given the government's habits of paranoia and overkill in these matters—witness the tanks and armored cars it rolled into Wounded Knee—one cannot avoid a suspicion that at least a few AIM leaders are being tried as much for their histrionics as for real crimes, or if not for histrionics, then for upsetting the customary balance of power—some would call it "peaceful relations"—between whites and Indians.

One's suspicions grow deeper when one looks at the politics of Pine Ridge, where an informal coalition of Federal bureaucrats, white ranchers and Indian political hacks manages the populace. The system of patronage they control would surpass Spiro Agnew's most extravagant fantasies—although it prospers not because there is so much loose cash floating around but because there is so little. In a community that suffers beyond description from joblessness, indecent housing and hunger, the political hierarchy wields enormous power, each new highway construction job, each new public housing unit, each sack of Commodity food exacts from the receiver a full measure of political servility.

It was this system, presided over by Tribal Council Chairman Richard Wilson in open connivance with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that AIM hoped to break by occupying Wounded Knee. Alas, the protesters only succeeded in drawing down the wrath of the Nixon Administration and in strengthening Richard Wilson's hand vis-à-vis Washington. In the aftermath of the affair "goon squads" (tribal policemen in the pay of the BIA) roved the reservation in search of AIM supporters. Suspects were frequently beaten and jailed, in one recent instance, a 9-year-old girl was shot in the eye as she and her father drove past a house full of Tribal Council supporters. To date, neither the Federal government nor the Tribal Council has been willing to investigate.

The climax to this bloodletting—one hopes it is the climax—occurred on October 17, when BIA police reportedly shot and killed one Pedro Bissonette, a leader of AIM who, like his six confreres, was under Federal indictment for alleged crimes committed at Wounded Knee. As of this writing, BIA Police Chief Del Eastman has refused to give details of the killing, stating only that a police officer "drew a

gun and fired one shot at Pedro Bissonette."

But attorney Mark Lane (one of those, you may recall, who insisted President Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy) says he saw Bissonette's body and that it was riddled with bullets "seven bullet holes in the chest from a .38 caliber pistol, any shot of which might have killed him; four other chest wounds; three bullet wounds in the hand." Lane and the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee he represents charge that police had been looking for Bissonette all day and had orders to shoot to kill.

We may never get to the bottom of this, partly because the police snatched the body away from the bereaved family and subjected it to a secret autopsy, the results of which have not been published, and partly because both the FBI and the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department have thus far been half-hearted in their investigations. The other day I asked a Justice official if he was satisfied that the investigations were being conducted with fairness and all due speed. He declined to answer.

ANOTHER discouraging factor amid all the misery is the virtual blackout imposed by the networks and the Eastern press on post-Wounded Knee events. If any justice is to prevail out here on the plains, it will have to come from Washington, from officials who read the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. At present these men are under the impression that no one who "counts" cares two hoots about what goes on at Pine Ridge. So, while Saxbe quips and Bork preens, murders in South Dakota do not get investigated, a fragile organization of young Indian radicals gets officially zapped, and an all too familiar cabal of predators at Pine Ridge continues to feed off its miserable constituents.

Some of these disputes will be settled in January—first when court convenes in St. Paul, and later when Richard Wilson faces an election challenge from several contenders, including Russell Means, one of AIM's founders and also one of the six indicted. Indeed, much of the recent violence at Pine Ridge may be interpreted as the Wilson faction's attempt to consolidate its strength, the way a junta of colonels in a banana republic consolidates its strength, and with the customary assistance from the United States government.

Yet it must be said that even if the improbable were to occur—acquittals in St. Paul and a Means victory at Pine Ridge—the rank-and-file Indian's lot would scarcely be improved. For there is little in AIM's short but colorful history to suggest that it is less prone to violence or more tolerant of dissent than are its adversaries. Nor has it formed the beginnings of a program that would dispel the hunger and despair, the all but total misery that pervades Indian life. What it does offer is a restoration of racial pride—no mean gift—and a certain cheeky style, a warrior's élan, that scares the hell out of white Middle Americans.

During AIM's national convention last summer, some of the members went to Oklahoma City airport to welcome their leaders. A reporter for the *Daily Oklahoman* has described the scene: "Sullen young men wearing red armbands, feathers and braids lined the hallway the length of the terminal, giving the proceedings a militant appearance. Many wore knives openly from their belt, but were unmolested from police who watched."

Of course it is not illegal to carry a knife or to wear a red armband, or to display ethnic truculence in a public place. But that white reporter plainly thought it was suspicious, as did the FBI whose agents ran around the airport scribbling notes and flashing cameras.