Most people have little idea about the far-reaching impact of the Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. Very young Indian people have never heard of Alcatraz. But it was one of the most important events of my life. The occupation lasted from November 19, 1969 until July 1971, a total of 19 months.

It started a fire storm of protest in the U.S. The protests against the war in Vietnam were in full swing. Civil rights protests against denial of voting rights of African Americans in the South were hot, and had been for five years.

The Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island only added to the fire storm and got Indian people into the front lines and in the media for the first time. UC Berkeley was in the middle of the movement. Ronald Reagan, the reactionary governor of California, was the leader of the other side.

I was the fourth Indian student at UC Berkeley when I arrived there in September 1968. LaNada Boyer Warjack (Shoshone-Bannock) was the first when she started in 1967, Lee Brightman (Creek-Lakota) was the second, and Patty Silvas (Blackfeet) was the third.

Lee was the original militant Indian. He and Dr. Jack Forbes (Powhatan), Dave Risling (Hoopa), and several others had former United Native Americans in 1966 and 1967. Lee led demonstrations, put out a militant newsletter, and tutored the founders of the American Indian Movement (AIM) when they came along in 1968.

He had finished college at Oklahoma State University twenty years earlier as an offensive lineman on the football team. He had moved to California and become a bouncer in the scruffy Indian bars in the Bay Area. In 1968 he was still running five miles on the beach each morning and was in great shape. It was his militancy that influenced dozens of Indian students in the Bay Area to take over Alcatraz Island.

The impact of Alcatraz has been huge. It literally inspired dozens of land occupations, demonstrations, protests, and other actions all over Indian Country. It was like the dam had burst and Indian people were not willing to take it any more.

Richard Oakes (Mohawk) was the leader of the occupation. Denis Turner (Luiseno) and LaNada Boyer were his main supporters and leaders of the occupation. Richard was a student at San Francisco State, LaNada was a student at Berkeley, and Denis was at UC Santa Cruz. I was the Mainland Coordinator of the occupation for the first two months, a title Richard gave me the first night.

One of the most famous of the Alcatraz occupiers was Eldy Bratt, a South American Inca Indian mother who lived in San Francisco. She came out to the Island with her baby and four other kids and stayed for months. One of the kids was Benjamin Bratt, the now-famous movie and TV star. Eldy was probably the most-photographed person on the island because of her bubbling personality and good looks.

Among the more noted demonstrations after Alcatraz were:

- A successful demonstration at Pyramid Lake, NV, against the big ranchers and developers who were draining the lake, which is located totally on the reservation.
- The takeover of Fort Lawton in Seattle and turning it into Daybreak Star Center.
- A protest against the horrible conditions of Indians who participated in the Gallup Intertribal Ceremonial in August 1970.
- The occupation of several pieces of land at Pit River in 1970 and later.
- The occupation of the Nike missile site near Davis, CA that eventually became D-Q University.
- The occupation and takeover of Rattlesnake Island in Clear Lake, CA by Pomo Indians.
- The occupation of Plymouth Rock by members of AIM.
- The occupation of the BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C. by AIM.
- The showdown led by AIM over the murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder in Custer, SD.

Steve Talbot, who was a graduate teaching assistant at UC Berkeley at the time we took over Alcatraz, wrote an article later in which he summarized the Alcatraz demands: Self-determination, or Indian control of Indian lives and lands; all-Indian unity; equal educational opportunity; cultural
revitalization; mutual assistance among Indian people; changes to the BIA and other government agencies to reflect more Indian power and control; peaceful coexistence between humans and the rest of the world, an Indian ecology, and the rebuilding of the Indian land base leading to self-sufficiency for Indian people.

The most important thing that happened post-Alcatraz was the changes in legislation. Among the important laws passed include:

- The Indian Self-Determination and Education Act.
- The revision of the Johnson-O'Malley Act to provide better education to Indians.
- The Indian Financing Act.
- The Indian Health Care Act.
- Creation of an Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs post in the Department of the Interior, upgrading the Commissioner's position.
- The return of Mount Adams to the Yakam Nation in Washington.
- The return of the sacred Blue Lake and 48,000 acres of land to the Pueblo of Taos.
- The development of Indian programs at over 300 colleges in the U.S. Prior to 1969, Indians were only found on a couple of dozen campuses in the U.S. The total number of Indian college students grew from a few thousand to over 60,000 today.
- An end to the “relocation” program, where Indians were forcibly removed from their homes on reservations and taken into cities and dumped, often with little or no training.
- An increase of 225% in funding for the BIA.
- A huge increase in funding for the Indian Health Service.
- The issuance of President Nixon's Indian policy of July 1970, in which he called for many changes in Indian policy, including an end to termination and self-rule for Indian people. Nixon’s football coach at Whittier College, whom he idolized, was the great Indian football player and coach “Chief” Newman. He taught Nixon, a third string player, a huge amount about Indian history and policy.
- And last, but not least, the end of the termination era. There were 178 tribes who lost their Indian rights because their treaties were terminated by a vengeful Republican leadership in Congress. Nixon signed this directive in 1970, reversing this policy as a direct result of the pressure from Alcatraz. Congress finally passed a law ending termination in 1978. But most of the terminated tribes are still terminated. In the worst case, one of the impoverished Ute tribes in Utah saw 50% of their people die between 1955 and 1975.

What happened to the Alcatraz people? Many of them have since made important contributions to the Indian world:

Richard Oakes, one of the greatest leaders we have ever had in Indian Country, was shot and killed by a YMCA camp director at his wife Annie’s reservation, Stewart’s Point, in 1971. The killer got off scot-free – never pulled a day for a coldblooded murder.

Dr. LaNada Boyer Warjack (Shoshone-Bannock) completed her doctorate in political science at the University of Idaho a decade ago, and works in education. She served as Director of Education and Executive Director for her tribe.

Al Miller (Seminole) moved back home to Watonga, OK several years after Alcatraz. In the early 1980s he was elected Vice Chief of his tribe.

Denis Turner (Luiseno) served as Chairman of the Rincon Reservation and has been the Executive Director of the Southern California Tribal Chairman’s Association for over a quarter of a century. He finished his degree at UC Santa Cruz.

Gerald Sam (Bridgeport) finished his degree at San Francisco State, worked as a city planner for the City of San Pablo, then moved home and became the chief executive of his tribe.

Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee) went back home in 1976, became the most successful grant writer in the history of the Cherokee Nation, ran for Vice Chief in 1983, moved up to “Principal Chief after the Principal Chief, Ross Swimmer, became Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, and won two more terms on her own. Wilma wrote three books, all of which were very successful.

Vicky Santana (Blackfeet) finished her law degree, moved back home, and rewrote the tribe’s constitution.

Verna Clinton (Navajo) finished her degree, got married, and teaches school in her home town of Chinle, AZ.

Linda Aranaydo (Creek) finished her degree, went to medical school, and has been a doctor in Indian Country for over 30 years.

The number of other Indians who took up the cause is huge. One article said 5,600 Indian people went to Alcatraz at one time or another. It changed their lives, made them mad, made them more hopeful that they could make a difference, and started them in that direction. In that sense – that they won’t take it any more, that they are willing to fight – Alcatraz was a positive occurrence.

Dr. Dean Chavers is Director of Catching the Dream, a national scholarship and school improvement organization in Albuquerque, NM. His last two books were “Modern American Indian Leaders" (Mellen Press) and "Racism in Indian Country" (Peter Lang). This article is adapted from the former. He can be reached by calling (505) 553-8435 or email ctd4deanchavers@aol.com.