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Media Interpretations of Wounded Knee II:  
Narratives of Violence versus Sympathetic Coverage

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On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1973, members of the American Indian Movement and their supporters—numbering into the hundreds—occupied the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation town of Wounded Knee. The town had been the site of an 1890 massacre in which members of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry killed over 150 Sioux men, women, and children; in 1973, it became the site of Wounded Knee II, a protest and armed resistance against Pine Ridge tribal chairman Dick Wilson’s corrupt government and America’s treatment of American Indians.<sup>1</sup> The American Indian Movement (AIM) and its supporters held the town for 71 days despite efforts by BIA and reservation police, FBI agents, and U.S. Marshals to oust them. By the end of the occupation two Wounded Knee protestors—Frank Clearwater and Lawrence Lamont—were dead and U.S. Marshal Lloyd Grimm was left paralyzed.

Unsurprisingly, the occupation of Wounded Knee resulted in a media frenzy, as seen in the coverage of the *Arizona Daily Star* and the more conservatively-minded *Atlanta Constitution* and *Chicago Tribune*. While the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution* reported narratives of violence and emphasized the threat posed by the American Indian Movement, the *Arizona Daily Star* published a significantly more sympathetic perspective. The *Arizona Daily Star* published articles on topics similar to those covered by the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Atlanta Constitution*, as seen in the shared emphasis on the weapons used by AIM and the balance of power between the United States government and the protestors, but its methods of coverage—ranging from contextualizing the arrests of AIM leaders to who the reporters chose to quote in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Grossman, *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Native American Rights Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Inc., 1996), 426.

their articles—challenged a conservative narrative of senseless violence and presented a perspective sympathetic to the cause of the Wounded Knee protestors.<sup>2</sup>

One of the aspects of the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee that grasped and held the attention of media, conservative and liberal newspapers alike, was the weaponry held by protestors and the threat that presented. This emphasis served to highlight the protestors' potential violence and ultimately portrayed them as a threat to the American public. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article titled "U.S. official called Wounded Knee situation grim," which largely focused on the commentary of Ralph Erikson, special assistant to Attorney General Richard Kleindienst. Reporter Robert Enstad wrote that Erikson "said the militants have an automatic weapon, believed to be an M-60 machine gun, 'which could wipe out a group of men.'"<sup>3</sup> This statement and quote served to not only focus specifically on the fact that AIM protestors had weapons within the village, but also to speculate what types of weapons they may have and exactly how deadly they could potentially be. The article continued to discuss an incident in which "a Federal Bureau of Investigation car was hit at noon, apparently with a high power telescopic rifle a mile away."<sup>4</sup> Again, the reporter paid special attention to the type of

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<sup>2</sup> A methodological note that requires mention: many of the articles discussed here, especially those published in the *Atlanta Constitution*, were chosen from national news services such as Associated Press (AP) or United Press International (UPI). This means that the articles were typically not written by the staff of the newspapers which published them and thus it is difficult to connect the content and rhetoric of these AP and UPI articles with the stance of the newspaper itself. However, it is also important to note that newspapers publishing AP and UPI articles had a degree of choice in which articles they would publish. Thus, the national news service articles which appeared in the newspapers studied here may still signify—although to a lesser degree than the papers written by staff reporters—the editorial stance of the newspapers themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Enstad, "U.S. official calls Wounded Knee situation grim," *Chicago Tribune*, March 3, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

weapons the AIM protestors potentially had as well as how much damage they were capable of. In doing so, the author and newspaper highlighted both the idea that AIM was a threat to federal agents attempting to regain control of Wounded Knee and the idea that these “militants” were highly skilled and capable of obtaining high-powered weapons. Essentially, it depicted them as extremely dangerous to the public at large.

The *Atlanta Constitution*, another conservative newspaper, published articles with similar narratives with regards to the weapons-related threat of AIM. In an article from the United Press International (UPI) news service titled “Feds threaten force: Indians fire on officers repeatedly,” the same interview with Erikson along with Justice Department spokesman Horace Webb was quoted with a similar emphasis on the threat of Movement’s violence. The author of the article wrote that “shots were fired at marshals and two FBI agents during the day and an FBI car set up as a roadblock was pocked by bullets as agents stood beside the vehicle.”<sup>5</sup> This shot, the article said, “was believed to have come from an M60 machine gun or a high-powered automatic rifle.”<sup>6</sup> These quotes and paraphrases of U.S. government officials served, much like the *Chicago Tribune* article previously quoted, to highlight not only the weapons the American Indian Movement had potentially obtained but to also emphasize the threat of the protestors. Here, they were described as having taken life-endangering shots at FBI cars and agents. Furthermore, the unnamed author of the article wrote that Webb “reported. . .that a single shot was fired at Erikson, Webb and other government officials as they negotiated with a representative of the American Indian Movement (AIM).”<sup>7</sup> Like the *Chicago Tribune* article, this served to create a narrative of

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<sup>5</sup> United Press International, “Feds threaten force: Indians fire on officers repeatedly,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

a protest movement characterized primarily by violence, dangerous weapons, and direct threats to government officials.

The *Arizona Daily Star*, which took a much more liberal stance on the American Indian Movement's occupation, nevertheless engaged in a similar tactic which emphasized the weapons and physical threat of the Wounded Knee protestors. In an article the Associated Press (AP) published titled "two siege-leaders flee; Indians, U.S. set talks," the unnamed author focused on the exchange of fire between AIM protestors and government agents as well as the possibility that AIM had received ammunition. The article stated that "a government spokesman estimated that between 3,000 and 4,000 rounds of ammunition were fired" during the single night which was the point of "heaviest exchange of gunfire" during the siege thus far.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the article discussed a potential delivery to the AIM protestors via airplane. Assistant U.S. Attorney General Kent Frizzell was quoted as saying that "the delivery of the guns and ammunition" by a plane which landed during a cease-fire "was witnessed through field glasses."<sup>9</sup> Although the article continued on to discuss how AIM had potentially lost power and influence within the village amongst the occupants, these quotes from government officials and statistics perpetuated the idea that AIM was an armed threat, this time even with unknown allies providing ammunition and guns.

However, these newspapers here studied portrayed AIM as a very specific type of threat: the contained threat. The *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Constitution*, and *Arizona Daily Star*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Associated Press, "Two siege leaders flee; Indians, U.S. set talks," *Arizona Daily Star*, March 28, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

capitalized on the idea that AIM was a threat by focusing on the weapons the group potentially had and by emphasizing the firefights between the government officials and the protestors. These newspapers characterized AIM as violent and dangerous while also emphasizing the ability of the federal government to ultimately subdue and defeat the protestors. The balance of power—or rather, the imbalance of power—between AIM and the federal government was clear: the government officials could defeat the occupants of Wounded Knee with complete and total ease. The *Chicago Tribune* exemplified this perspective on the balance of power in the article “Leave Wounded Knee today – U.S. ultimatum.” Here, author Robert Enstad wrote about a “Justice Department statement. . .which strongly implied that the situation [AIM’s take-over of Wounded Knee] might finally be resolved by gunfire.”<sup>10</sup> A further implication was that this resolution would come not only through gunfire in general, but through the gunfire of the government agents at Wounded Knee. Additionally, the author quoted Ralph Erickson, special assistant to Attorney General Richard Kleindeinst, as saying “the only bargaining power they have is our concern for the men, women, and children who live in Wounded Knee.”<sup>11</sup> This statement—coming from a position of substantial authority—essentially states that the Wounded Knee protestors were at the mercy of the government and their occupation could be ended at any time. Most importantly, this statement was the last sentence in the entire article, a rhetorical strategy which gave this quote a position of special emphasis and impact. Thus, while *Chicago Tribune* articles focused on the threat of the Wounded Knee occupiers, they also emphasized the power of the government over these protestors.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Enstad, “Leave Wounded Knee today—U.S. ultimatum,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The *Atlanta Constitution* similarly portrayed the AIM protestors as a contained (or at least containable) threat in the articles published regarding the occupation. In a UPI article titled “McGovern, Abourezk Negotiate with Indians” the balance of power between AIM and the US government was not as explicit as in the previously mentioned *Chicago Tribune* article; rather, it was implied through a set of parallels. While the AIM protestors “held off surrounding FBI agents and federal and local police with rifles and shotguns for two days,” the US Marshals “herded away” newsmen “with submachine guns and rifles.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the federal government was implied to have superior fire power; while the protestors had rifles and shotguns, the US Marshals had submachine guns and rifles. With this parallel, it was clear who was in power.

This imbalance of power between the protestors and the federal government is also apparent in articles published in the *Arizona Daily Star*. As in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*, it is clear that the government is the one in control of the situation and the one most able to subdue the other. However, the *Arizona Daily Star*’s methods of journalism, while allowing for the same power dynamic between the two, created a completely different tone: the American Indians were the potential innocent victims of violence. This depiction is best seen in the article “Wounded Knee Indians backed here,” published on March 9, 1973. In this article, local Arizona protestors, marching in solidarity with the occupiers of Wounded Knee, were portrayed as ultimately non-violent. Author Alex Drehsler wrote that “the demonstrators were orderly and peaceful as they [marched],” and that a sergeant of the federal protective service

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<sup>12</sup> United Press International, “McGovern, Abourezk negotiate with Indians,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 2, 1973.; This article appears to have been written prior to Erickson’s accusation that the American Indians occupying Wounded Knee had a M60.

“said there had been no threats or problems with the demonstrators.”<sup>13</sup> However, the federal building to which the marchers were headed was locked nearly five hours before its usual closing time with “guards inside the building...waiting in blue riot jumpsuits with helmets and clubs.”<sup>14</sup> This juxtaposition between the guards and the protestors highlighted not only the fact that the government had power over the American Indian protestors but also laid the groundwork for a potential threat of police violence against the protestors. The American Indian protestors were not a threat, but they were treated as such according to Drehsler’s article. The imbalance of power between the American Indian protestors and the federal government, when described by the *Arizona Daily Star*, becomes somewhat of a danger itself. The power of the government forces was not necessarily a method to return to law and order; instead, the government forces were a potential threat to peaceful protestors asking for a redress of grievances.

The superficial topics covered by *Arizona Daily Star* may have been similar to that of conservative papers *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*, but its methods of coverage during Wounded Knee II, specifically the newspaper’s willingness to contextualize the events surrounding the protest, allowed a more sympathetic standpoint to emerge. Furthermore, this pattern of contextualization publicized the American Indian perspective on the protest.

Such purposeful contextualization can be seen in the *Arizona Daily Star*’s treatment of the arrests of American Indian protestors, specifically those of main members of AIM. For example, a March 26, 1973 article written by Elaine Nathanson described the arrest of Vernon Bellecourt—director of AIM—in a way rarely if ever seen in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta*

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<sup>13</sup> Alex Drehsler, “Wounded Knee Indians backed here,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 9, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

*Constitution*. In the article “We’ll succeed, AIM head says” Nathanson wrote about a speaking engagement by Richard Two Elk, who spoke on behalf of Vernon Bellecourt. According to the article, Bellecourt “could not make last night’s scheduled speech, Two Elk said, because he was arrested in New York on Saturday during a march in support of the Indian movement.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the statement was short and somewhat cursory, this article provided a background for Bellecourt’s arrest, rather than presenting him as simply a jailed criminal. This contextualization of arrests was again seen in an article published the next day, also written by Nathanson, which further explicated Bellecourt’s arrest. In the article, titled “Leader says Sioux will ignore order,” Nathanson wrote that “Bellecourt, who was arrested in North Carolina Saturday during a Tuscarora Indian demonstration, said he saw pregnant Indian women kicked in the stomach by North Carolina troopers.”<sup>16</sup> This quote not only corrected a mistake from the previous day’s article (Bellecourt had been arrested in North Carolina, not New York) but also presented a context of police brutality and potential police misbehavior. Again, the article did not portray Bellecourt as simply a criminal, but rather as a victim of injustice. Furthermore, by publishing the claim that pregnant women were assaulted by troopers, the *Arizona Daily Star* publicized a potential justification of the aims of the American Indian Movement by clearly presenting the violence and injustice which AIM protestors and others were experiencing and combatting. By contextualizing the arrest of Vernon Bellecourt, the *Arizona Daily Star* presented a perspective sympathetic to the cause of Wounded Knee protestors and AIM in general.

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<sup>15</sup> Elaine Nathanson, “We’ll succeed, AIM head says,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 26, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Nathanson, “Leader says Sioux will ignore order,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 27, 1973.

Such treatments of arrests and criminality were not seen in the *Chicago Tribune* or *Atlanta Constitution* articles here studied. The *Chicago Tribune* often presented arrests of AIM members devoid of their contexts, as exemplified in the article “Led building takeover: criminal records of 3 Indian leaders told,” published the November prior to AIM’s occupation of Wounded Knee. This article, written by Michael Satchell, described the arrest records of Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and Vernon Bellecourt, all of whom were leaders of AIM. Each discussion of these leaders’ arrests in this article did not mention the context of the arrests. Satchell wrote that “a high police official. . .said that Denis [sic] Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and. . .Vernon Bellecourt, had served sentences in Minnesota penitentiaries for a variety of felony offenses including burglary, aggravated assault, and armed robbery.”<sup>17</sup> The article went on to say that:

Banks had been convicted 15 times on charges including assault and battery and burglary. Clyde Bellecourt, the official said, was found guilty of armed robbery in 1954 and was sentenced to serve 2 to 15 years in prison. After parole police said, he was convicted in 1958 of burglary, sentenced to 5 years in prison, paroled again and then was convicted of burglary in 1960 and paroled in 1964. Police said Clyde Bellecourt is now facing charges of aggravated criminal property damage involving vandalism at a Minneapolis restaurant.<sup>18</sup>

While many of these crimes were most likely unrelated to American Indian protest (and indeed appear to have occurred largely before AIM was founded), by presenting these arrests devoid of context this article portrayed the leaders of AIM as criminals, nothing more.

A similar silence on the potential reasons for perceived criminality was echoed in an *Atlanta Constitution* article titled “McGovern, Abourezk negotiate with Indians.” The author

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Satchell, “Led building takeover: criminal record of 3 Indian leaders told,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

provided a succinct description of AIM at the end of the article and chose to define it as “the group with sacked the BIA building in Washington last fall and battled state, county and city police recently at Custer, S.D., where a courthouse and Chamber of Commerce building were set afire.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of defining AIM as a group protesting American Indian treatment in the United States or describing these events as protests (which, according to those who were present such as AIM leader Russell Means, is exactly what they were), the author chose to depict AIM as a criminal group responsible for random property damage devoid of meaning.<sup>20</sup> The organization “sacked” a building, “battled” police, and, as the author implied in the article, “set afire” Custer, S.D. buildings. All of these terms are violent and, in the context of the article, obviously criminal. Such a description depicted—as in the *Chicago Tribune* article on the AIM leaders’ arrest records—the organization as violent, trouble-making, and destructive without legitimate grievances.

A significant characteristic of *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution* articles described thus far is their silence on the American Indian perspective. The *Chicago Tribune* rarely quoted American Indian participants, choosing instead to quote white government officials. When American Indians were quoted at length, the statements recorded were often threats. For example, in the article “U.S. official calls Wounded Knee situation grim,” AIM spokesman Aaron DeSersa, whose house had been firebombed by unnamed persons, was quoted as saying “they are coming to bring this to a head. . . .I expect some people are going to die.”<sup>21</sup> Although

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<sup>19</sup> United Press International, “McGovern, Abourezk negotiate with Indians,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 2, 1973.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Means and Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 230-235, 243-246.

the context of this quote—the firebombing of DeSersa’s home and his statement in the article that he “expect[s] more federal officials here. We have no law and order here”—sounds more like a plea for assistance and protection, it still had a threatening tone.<sup>22</sup> The *Atlanta Constitution* rarely quoted American Indians, choosing instead articles which paraphrased their released statements and demands, such as the March 1, 1973 article titled “Indians seize post, hold 11 hostages, swap fire,” which failed to quote a single named American Indian.<sup>23</sup> This tendency to quote only government officials and virtually no protestors effectively silenced the American Indian voice in the protest narrative as it was written by the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*.

The *Arizona Daily Star* departed from this method of silencing AIM and its supporters by quoting American Indian participants. Unlike the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Arizona Daily Star* frequently quoted American Indians at length, essentially allowing the protestors to speak for themselves and present arguments and explanations in favor of their actions. When reporting on a local solidarity protest, the *Arizona Daily Star* reporter included not only the purpose of the demonstration as stated by Concerned Indians of Greater Tucson leader Mike Wilson, but also included the slogans written on protest placards such as “Justice at Wounded Knee, at last” and “As long as the Rivers Flow, We’ll Stand Proud as Native American Indians.”<sup>24</sup> An article published in the midst of the Wounded Knee conflict, titled “On the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Enstad, “U.S. official calls Wounded Knee situation grim,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 3, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> United Press International, “Indians seize post, hold 11 hostages, swap fire,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 1, 1973.

reservation, Indian life goes on: seeking solutions quietly” and originally from the Christian Science Monitor Service, consisted of the author’s impressions of life on the reservation and, more importantly, the opinions and statements of reservation leaders on how to solve some of the problems facing American Indians.<sup>25</sup> This pattern of directly quoting American Indians and allowing them to describe their goals and challenges in their own words was perhaps best exemplified in the article “We’ll succeed, AIM head says” by Elaine Nathanson. Nearly one third of this article consisted of direct quotes from Richard Two Elk including, surprisingly, statements on how the media was misinterpreting some aspects of the AIM take over. For example, Two Elk was quoted as saying, “The newspapers are speaking a lot about Indians picking up guns and wanting to kill. This is not true. The guns are necessary to have for protection.”<sup>26</sup> By providing such extensive reporting on the American Indian protestors’ perspective on the occupation, the *Arizona Daily Star* further fostered a sympathetic stance.

This pattern of allowing American Indians protestors to speak for themselves—and simply reporting their perspective on the takeover—is perhaps most apparent in the differences between how the *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Constitution*, and *Arizona Daily Star* portrayed the motives behind the protest. The *Chicago Tribune* frequently published articles which gave no mention of the goals of the protest, or what the American Indians in Wounded Knee were even protesting, as seen in the articles “FBI agent is shot near Wounded Knee” and “Leave Wounded

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<sup>24</sup> Alex Drehsler, “Wounded Knee Indians backed here,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 9, 1973.

<sup>25</sup> David Holmstrom (Christian Science Monitor News Service), “On the reservation, Indian life goes on: seeking solutions quietly,” March 25, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Nathanson, “We’ll succeed, AIM head says,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 26, 1973.

Knee today – U.S. ultimatum.”<sup>27</sup> Articles which do mention the reasons behind Wounded Knee tended to summarize the complex factors behind the takeover into a single sentence. This occurred in “Indians fire on cars, planes: S.D. Sioux hold 11; U.S. encircles village” in which the unnamed author wrote simply: “the embattled Indians relayed demands to Washington that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hold hearings on treaties made with the Indians, that the Senate start a ‘full-scale investigation’ of government treatment of the Indians, and that another inquiry be launched into ‘all Sioux reservations in South Dakota.’”<sup>28</sup> While this quote did provide a fair amount of explanation of the demands of the protesting American Indians, it gave no context as to why the protest was occurring or why these demands were being made. A similar method was employed in an article published by the *Atlanta Constitution* regarding the end of the 71-day siege. This United Press International article, titled “Indian surrender ends Wounded Knee siege,” like the *Chicago Tribune* article, summarized the goals and demands of the AIM protesters in a single sentence: “AIM militants seized Wounded Knee to dramatize Indian demands for the rights given them by treaties with the United States and to try to force the overthrow of the Oglala Sioux government of Tribal Chairman Dick Wilson on the Pine Ridge Reservation.”<sup>29</sup> Such brevity failed to explain why this protest was happening or provide any specific grievances being protested. Without the context of why the American Indians at Wounded Knee were protesting, the narratives of violence and criminality were left unchallenged and unadulterated.

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<sup>27</sup> “FBI agent is shot near Wounded Knee,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1973; Robert Enstad, “Leave Wounded Knee today—U.S. ultimatum,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1973.

<sup>28</sup> “Indians fire on cars, planes: S.D. Sioux hold 11; U.S. encircles village,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1973.

<sup>29</sup> United Press International, “Indian surrender ends Wounded Knee siege,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 9, 1973.

The *Arizona Daily Star*, unlike these two conservative newspapers, included extensive quotes and paraphrases regarding the reasons for the protest. This is apparent in the treatment of statements made by AIM director Vernon Bellecourt in the article “Leader says Sioux will ignore order.” Here, author Elaine Nathanson quoted the parallels drawn by Bellecourt between the occupation of Wounded Knee and the American Revolution, as well as Bellecourt’s assurances that “we are not saying destroy the government, but change it,” a claim inspired by the Declaration of Independence.<sup>30</sup> Such statements not only allowed Bellecourt’s explanations for the protest to be presented to the public with little to no mediation, but also portrayed forceful arguments in favor of AIM which drew on American patriotism. By allowing explanations of the Wounded Knee protest into the account, the *Arizona Daily Star* challenged the conservative narrative of senseless violence.

From some of their earliest occupation-protests, American Indian activists attempted to use the media to their advantage. They often relied on media attention to spread news of their protests and to dramatize their cause.<sup>31</sup> However, their attempt to use the media appears to have backfired within conservative newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*, which frequently presented the events of Wounded Knee in a decontextualized manner that emphasized the violence and threat of the American Indian Movement. Although the sympathetic *Arizona Daily Star* published articles which provided the contextual information regarding Wounded Knee II and allowed American Indian protestors to have a voice in their story as told by the media, this newspaper was published locally and had a smaller readership

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<sup>30</sup> Elaine Nathanson, “Leader says Sioux will ignore order,” *Arizona Daily Star*, March 27, 1973.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Alcatraz! Alcatraz! The Indian Occupation of 1969-1971* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1992), 44.

than the *Chicago Tribune* and *Atlanta Constitution*. It was surely less influential than the two conservative papers explored here. The study of media interpretations on major events in history is vital, as media is a mechanism which not only informs the public about current events—and thus shapes their opinions thereof—but also helps to develop the dominant narrative of the event and how it will sit in American memory. This topic may be best understood through further research, including studies of how other American Indian protest movements and other newspapers fit into this narrative.

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