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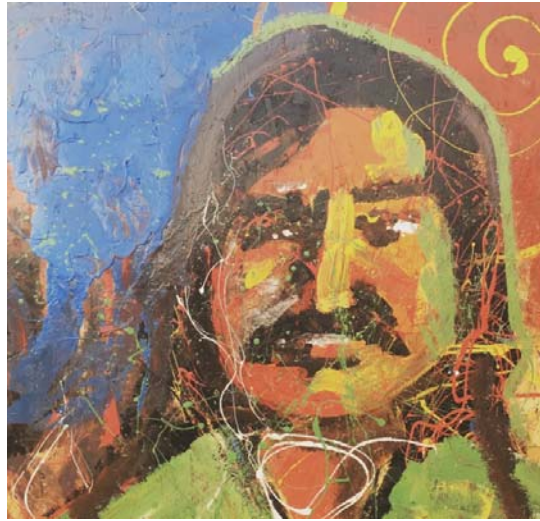
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A Prayer for Leonard Peltier



A portrait of Leonard Peltier at the entrance of Oceti Sakowin Camp, 2016.

Indigenous political prisoner Leonard Peltier finally returns home. In the last moments of his presidency, Joe Biden commuted his two consecutive life sentences to home confinement. Many in Indian Country see this executive clemency as a significant victory in a decades-long campaign for his release. However, clemency is not the same as a pardon or exoneration, nor does it reclaim the five decades of life taken from elder Peltier or the time lost with his family. It also does not overturn what many consider a wrongful conviction or provide justice for decades of FBI misconduct. Yet, the 80-year-old member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa will spend the rest of his days surrounded by loved ones at home.

The entire history of Peltier's campaign — with its twists and turns, betrayals and victories — has yet to be written. My involvement in the movement is minor compared to those who survived the shootout at Oglala in 1975 or lost their lives during the “reign of terror” that engulfed the Pine Ridge reservation after the 71-day siege at Wounded Knee in 1973. Others

who devoted their entire lives fighting for his freedom didn't live long enough to witness Peltier's return home. His return home would not have happened without their sacrifices.

I became involved in the campaign to free Leonard Peltier in 2013. The International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee was based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I attended graduate school. There were annual demonstrations advocating for his freedom at the federal courthouse. As Barack Obama's administration ended, the drive for presidential clemency intensified. Additionally, the Water Protector Movement at Standing Rock, opposing the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, provided a rare chance to discuss Peltier's case with a national audience and its impact on American Indian rights in the United States. I don't remember a time before 2016 when there was an international platform and an open audience for what are often marginalized and easily dismissed "Indigenous stories" in corporate media.

The clemency campaign was invigorating. It linked the experiences of Water Protectors at Standing Rock to the previous generation of Red Power activists, many of whom, by then elders, also made pilgrimages to the Oceti Sakowin camp at the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri rivers. There were also similarities in how the police responded to Water Protectors as they did to the Red Power Movement. Notably, the swift and violent crackdown against Water Protectors created a new generation of Indigenous political prisoners, awakening many across the world to the reality that the Indian wars and American Indian people were not mere relics of a lamentable past. Those struggles were, and remain, very much central to our present realities. Leonard Peltier's case and ongoing persecution exemplify that truth.

After I left the Standing Rock camps for the last time in late November, I traveled to Washington, D.C., to petition Congress for Leonard Peltier's release. Appealing to the humanity of those who have dehumanized us and our movements is not an easy ask for me. But I felt compelled by a sense of duty. The Obama administration had made many promises to Indian Country. I thought we had a chance.

On the morning of December 9, I woke up to the heartbreaking news that Peltier's son, Wahacanka Paul Shields, had died in the hotel room next to mine. He passed away fighting for the freedom of a father he only got to know while in prison. His death, however, didn't elicit any sympathy from those with the power to free his father. The reactions to our lobbying efforts were cold. Fear gripped our so-called elected congressional allies as Donald Trump's presidency loomed large. How cruel, I thought. Native faces made for great photo ops, but we get sidelined amidst the settler political infighting as an inconvenience. The

lesson I learned was that crying on the colonizer's shoulder can get you killed. You will die waiting for them to recognize your humanity. The lobbying efforts in front of congressional staffers who'd rather be elsewhere were humiliating. We were not a priority.

Unlike the high points of the movement to free Peltier, when hundreds, and sometimes thousands, demonstrated on his behalf, in December 2016, there were only a few of us: several of Peltier's children—Chauncey and Kathy; longtime advocates like Peter Clark, Eda Gordon, and Suzie Baer; his AIM spiritual advisor, Lenny Foster; and two survivors of the Oglala shootout, Norman Patrick Brown and Jean Roach, who were teenagers at the time but are now elders in their own right. It wasn't a low point, despite not achieving what we aimed for. For me, the conversations were enlightening. Everyone else had decades more experience than I did. Beyond the shared knowledge, it was very clear that Leonard Peltier was as much a political prisoner as he was a spiritual one. The Indian Wars, both old and new, were as much about achieving the political conquest of Indigenous peoples as they were about spiritual warfare—attempting to extinguish the fires of resistance even if they had been reduced to embers.

I now realize that movements aren't only defined by their high points or the eye-catching spectacles of public demonstrations. Mobilizations are important, but they aren't what sustains a movement over many years. Movements are shaped by periods of backlash and reaction, especially when victory feels distant or unattainable. For American Indian people, this reality confronts us nearly every day in a settler society that seeks to erase us and forget our existence. Erasing what came before and continues to exist, despite acts of genocide and elimination, makes it easier to claim land and resources that rightfully belong to others.

Leonard Peltier's campaign appeared impossible, a fool's errand to outsiders. Plenty of detractors said he would never get out. Sympathetic people were sometimes surprised that he was still alive or that he was still in prison. They had forgotten about him—maybe about us, too, and the movements fighting for our continued existence. Or perhaps they just tuned in at the wrong times. It's easy to forget. It's harder to remember. It's even harder to reverse the course of a history that seems to naturalize our erasure. Peltier's struggle behind walls cut off from the world was spiritual, keeping the faith in the people and movement of history. Ours on the outside had to match that level of commitment.

What are we willing to do for liberation? That is a profoundly political and spiritual question. It has humbled me to see in others their commitment, watching comrades endure devastating sanctions or genocidal wars but still maintain a revolutionary duty to stay, fight, and build power. Leonard Peltier survived five decades in a prison cell. His fight was spiritual.

On January 20, I kept hitting refresh on the White House press briefing website. The Trump inauguration ceremonies had already begun, and time was running out for Biden to grant clemency to Peltier. There were no updates.

Frustrated, I stepped into the twenty-below weather. It was so cold that the moisture in the air crystallized into ice, producing the effect of a light snowfall despite the clear sky. The sunlight refracted through the ice particles, creating a glittering rainbow effect. I made my way to the Mississippi River to an eagle's nest. I said a prayer with a tobacco offering, hoping the Wanbli would take that message.

Within minutes of returning from the river, my phone blew up. "He's coming home."

This piece first appeared on [Red Scare](#).

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