

The Lakotah Secession

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In mid-December, an organization of Lakotah Sioux issued a declaration of independence claiming to unilaterally break treaties with the US government going back to 1868. “We are no longer citizens of the United States of America and all those who live in the five-state area that encompasses our country [Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming] are free to join us,” activist Russell Means said at a press conference.

Means, one of the organization’s “chief facilitators,” explained to the press that the new country would issue passports and driving licenses to those who disowned their status as US citizens. Some of the other public faces of Lakotah separatism include American Indian Movement (AIM) militants Canupa Gluha Mani (formerly Duane Martin, Sr.) and Naomi Archer of the Oglala Lakotah Strong Heart Warrior Society, Phyllis Young of Women of All Red Nations (WARN), and Garry Rowland of the Chief Big Foot Riders.

Official messages from the “Provisional Government of the Republic of Lakotah” (and a connected group called simply “Lakotah Ovate”) were sent to US State Department, and Lakotah diplomatic missions conferred with officials at the South African, Bolivian, and Chilean embassies. An ill-defined underground organization of “Bulgarian freedom fighters” has expressed their support for the action, as have Venezuela’s leftist president Hugo Chavez and the post-Soviet dictator Vladimir Putin. As of early February, only two US government Bureau of Indian Affairs-sanctioned tribal governments have repudiated this secession movement; a delegation of Cheyenne are said to be contemplating a similar declaration later this spring, and such talk has been heard in some corners of the Mohawk Nation and among other tribes of Turtle Island.

Outside of the Prairie states affected, this stunning announcement was largely ignored by the corporate media. Those who did report on it presumably did so for its novelty value, and comments on the story appearing on internet news sites were choked with sneers about casinos and “drunken Indians” (it looks like those bigots have never heard of Catalonians, Kosavars, Kurds, or Quebecois).

I’m not aware of any news agency that classified the Lakotah declaration as part of a wider wave of Fourth World insurrection. By some counts, there are about 6000 communities in the world today involved in some type of “Fourth World struggle,” defined here as insurrectionary efforts by minority populations with distinct political cultures and ethnic identities to gain sovereignty over a distinctly separate territorial homeland. All signs indicate that number and intensity of Fourth World struggles will likely increase rather than diminish in the future.

The question of whether or not this particular self-determination movement is a good thing for the Lakotah Sioux (or for native peoples in North America more broadly) cannot be answered here—Russell Means is a controversial and very divisive figure within the American Indian civil rights movement with ties to the so-called “Libertarian” Party in the United States and to the academic activist Ward Churchill. [i] *Fifth Estate* failed to find anyone connected with the Lakotah secession willing to write about it for the magazine. Nor could they find someone who was knowledgeable enough about the complicated history of AIM (and its sectarian splinters) to walk us through the deeper meaning of this expression of self-determination at this moment in time. [ii]

The best I can offer, then, are general remarks.

Are secession movements like the Lakotah Ovate at all relevant to anarchists? A couple years ago, *Fifth Estate* ran a report-back from a meeting in Vermont of New England secessionists and it touched off a bit of argument. Once in a while, some individual effort by the Zapatistas, or the Palestinians or the Basques attracts anarchist attentions, but the consensus seems to be to avoid these sorts of efforts. Why should anarchists involve themselves in efforts by “provisional governments” to establish ethnic sovereignty? Why would anarchists be interested in movements that create more nations, more governments, and more borders? Secessionism and proclamations for self-rule usually reek with the stench of nationalism, ethnic pride, and often religious identity politics. Why in the hell would any of us want more causes like that?

But look at it this way: obviously, Putin and Chavez don't give a damn about the rights of indigenous people in North America or anywhere. They spoke out in support of the Lakotah renegades because of their own anti-US political agendas. Perhaps it's this kind of strictly limited thinking that anarchists need to adopt when considering whether or not to defend Fourth World fights. just think about how a dozen such aboriginal uprisings could erode the day-to-day effectiveness of the USA's empire. In its simplest form, the nationalist rebellions of Tibetans against the Chinese are more than a Buddhist revolt or an anti-Chinese revolt: it is an attack on the authority and integrity of the State. The same goes for the Welsh, Flemish, Balochistani, or the Bavarian militants. Each have their own extremely specific historical reasons for their separatist organizations and most are motivated by some very particular set of identity politics to which most anarchists would object, But all are attacks against the State.

The Lakotah secession is more than a battle fought by an underprivileged tribal group in the Midwest lashing out against a century and a half of a very specific history of persecution, oppression, and poverty. in broader and more general terms, the Lakotah's war for sovereignty is a war for autonomous multi-cellular decentralization against the State. It is an attempt to set up one more small-scale alternative to the over-developed obesities of the New World Order. Isn't that something anarchists can agree on?

These aren't movements that want to remove the ruling political parties from government so that they can take over the State. They want to break the grip that the State has over their lives. Each tiny secession group is a grain of sand contributing to the gumming up of the grinding gears of the megamachine.

One of the editors at *Fifth Estate* rejected a different version of my article and said that what I was arguing reminded him of “just another version of the Communist Party's platform for Third World struggles during the Cold War.” But I say that complaining about what is or what isn't “anarchist enough” for anarchists to get behind is just another version of what a Communist Party does when it tests for ideological discipline and purity. For anarchists to sit back and say “Well, let's wait and see what political philosophy these people support” is really just an excuse to do nothing. For anarchists, this is the equivalent of being complicit with state control.

Fifth Estate brags about “supporting revolution everywhere”; well, what the Lakotah (and soon enough, other First Nation and native organizations) are doing is an anti-colonial revolt. They are breaking away from a government and a State that has ethnically cleansed them from North America physically, culturally and economically. *Fifth Estate* may not support the cause of revolt on the rez, but I do. I hope others of you will, too.

Notes

[i] The bloody stand off between the FBI, US Federal marshals, and AIM at Pine Ridge, SD, in February, 1973 included some of the Lakotah separatists responsible for December's declaration. The fall-out from the Wounded Knee takeover shattered the movement and caused decades-worth of suspicions, grudges, and in-fighting. Here in Minnesota, the late Clyde Bellecourt of the Minneapolis American Indian Movement regularly accused Russell Means of criminal activity and often denounced Ward Churchill as a government agent. He also called for reprisals against Churchill for his “un-American” 2001 essay on the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

[ii] In the late 1960s, AIM had been vital in wresting local control of reservation life away from the Federal government and for advancing the fight for the most basic human and civil rights. The government responded as expected: treachery, brutality, COINTELPRO, dirty tricks, and show trials with lots of sketchy evidence. For *Fifth Estate* readers unaware of the story, consider the trial and imprisonment of Leonard Peltier as completely typical of the Feds' persecution of AIM.

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