

December 30, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

RE: Executive Clemency for Leonard Peltier

Dear President Biden:

In 1971 I was hired as a Bureau of Indian Affairs 7th/8th grade teacher on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. In 1973 the Village of Wounded knee was besieged for 71 days by FBI agents and Federal Marshals. The schools were closed and I was reassigned to work with the FBI as part of the siege operation. Having served as an intelligence analyst and targeting specialist for two years in the Vietnam War, I was a trained observer. While working with the FBI agents during the siege, I had a unique opportunity to observe and evaluate FBI operations on the reservation.

The FBI agents were well-educated and came from urban centers. Most agents lacked military training, were physically out of shape, and mentally unprepared for the rigors of field operations. They were ignorant of the history of the Lakota-Sioux people, unaware of the pressing issues on the reservation, and disoriented to the point of bewilderment.

The agency displayed a woeful lack of tactical leadership and operational discipline in the field. The lack of effective discipline and control led to situations of appalling behavior by young agents towards many reservation residents. The younger agents in particular began taking out their discomfort and frustrations on the local residents. The American Indian Movement and traditional Lakota people were regarded as the enemy. One of the consequences of this attitude was that agents were constantly firing their weapons downrange into the village of Wounded Knee. Many days during the siege, I witnessed over 10,000 rounds fired into the community. On several occasions I found it necessary to intervene in order to prevent, and in one situation stop, the physical brutalization of local people.

For the two and half years following the siege, a wave of violence swept across the Pine Ridge Reservation. I gradually became aware that the FBI, the federal agency ultimately responsible for law enforcement on the reservation, bore responsibility for the growing level of violent crime. Lacking any real presence on the reservation or reliable sources of information, the FBI began to use their traditional method by setting up a network of paid informants. The Lakota, being the most impoverished people in the United States, responded enthusiastically to this recruitment effort. Playing the system, that is, giving the white man what he wanted, was a well-honed survival skill among the residents of Pine Ridge. Within a short time, being a government informant became the new growth industry on the reservation.

The informants, in order to remain on paid status, had to prove their credibility to the FBI. They did so with gusto. Reports poured into their FBI handlers. "AIM is going to firebomb Our Lady of Lourdes Mission School." "The American Indian Movement is planning to burn down the Porcupine Community Center." Then, fire bomb materials would be found under the cattle guard of the mission school in the village of Porcupine. A community center or another isolated building would be burned down as predicted.

The presence of FBI agents on the reservation was so transitory that they were easily deceived by their informants. Throughout this period of time, referred to by the people who lived through the era as “the Reign of Terror,” the FBI agents in the Rapid City office appeared to be blissfully unaware that they were being manipulated by their informants. The FBI sponsored a violent crime wave which destroyed valuable property and terrorized the reservation.

Even more serious than the informant situation was the FBI’s active support and tacit approval of the open operations of the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (the GOONs). This was a vigilante organization comprised of Dick Wilson (tribal chairman) supporters, tribal police, and non-traditional Lakota tribal members who were in opposition to the American Indian Movement.

After the siege, I resigned from the BIA in disgust and became a Jesuit Lay Volunteer teacher at the Catholic mission school in Porcupine, six miles north of the village of Wounded Knee. While I was serving at the mission school, a member of the Guardians of Our Oglala Nation came to my house to recruit me to join the GOONs. He told me that as a Vietnam war veteran and a person who had worked with the FBI during the siege, he was sure that I wanted to preserve law and order on the reservation from the threat of the American Indian Movement. I questioned him in great detail, protesting that I was white, not Native American. He assured me that my race was not an obstacle. “But what about the FBI?” I enquired. “Are they involved with you?” His response, “Well, they are not directly involved with us, Paul. Their support is indirect. For the most part, they approve of what we are doing.” He also indicated that the FBI support included occasionally supplying bullets to members of the organization. It was apparent from his assurances that the GOON violence engulfing the reservation had the tacit approval and even direct support of the FBI.

The brutality and bloodshed on the reservation by this time was totally out of control. Beatings, drive-by shootings, and killings were commonplace. At the Catholic Mission School, with the approval of the Jesuit authorities, we fortified the mission grounds. We set up trip wires connected to batteries and lights as a warning system against intruders. I taught school, drove school bus, and then had a four-hour security watch every night armed with a M1 carbine. Residents of the reservation, especially the traditional Lakota and supporters of the American Indian Movement were extremely fearful. During this time, two of our students were shot---Delphine Redshirt, and Sandra Woundedfoot. Delphine survived. Sandra was raped, tortured, and murdered by BIA Special Investigator Paul D. Herman. (He was ultimately convicted of manslaughter and served only seven years.) I remember young FBI agents during this incredible time driving around the reservation like out-of-control teenagers. At one point two FBI agents in a car behind (mission school teacher) Judy Furlong and (student) Delphine Redshirt proceeded to terrorize them by bumping their vehicle into the rear of Judy’s car. The agents then drove their vehicle beside Judy and Delphine, laughing as they passed by.

The gunfight at the Jumping Bull housing area took place during this turbulent time. People gathered together for mutual protection, fearful of the drive by shootings. The victims of the violence during the Reign of Terror were overwhelmingly either supporters of the American Indian Movement, traditional Lakota people, or innocent victims---including children. In the years since that sad time, the FBI has used Leonard Peltier to shield itself from accountability for the legacy of malfeasance on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

President Biden, you recently took administrative action to arrange the release of Britney Griner from incarceration in Russia. Leonard Peltier has been incarcerated unjustly by the United States government for the past 47 years under circumstances far more egregious than that of Britney Griner. I

implore you to heal this open wound on our nation's history. Grant executive clemency to Leonard Peltier.

Sincerely,

Paul K. Berg
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