

## Honor the Goons? Never!

In a recent editorial, the Lakota Journal (February 13-20, 2004) suggested honoring the Goons of the Dick Wilson era as President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in the early 1970s. According to the Journal, "The so-called GOONS stayed to clean up the mess left on the Pine Ridge Reservation by the (AIM) occupiers of Wounded Knee. These are the people who should be honored for their tenacity, selflessness and dedication."

Nothing is said in the editorial about what was cleaned up, nor about the methods used in the clean-up. For the sake of historical accuracy and journalistic honesty, that editorial needs to be answered.

For those who do not recall that era, it was in the turbulent times when the American Indian Movement went to Pine Ridge in response to Oglalas who felt that their rights were being trampled by a tyrannical tribal regime. In the ensuing confrontation, AIM occupied the village of Wounded Knee in a three-month standoff against the combined forces of U.S. Marshals, the FBI, U.S. military, and the Goons. The story was front-page news throughout much of the world for the duration.

AIM was spawned in Minneapolis and other urban areas in the 1960s, at a time of much racial unrest throughout the country. They formed in reaction to mistreatment of Indian people at the hands of the police in urban ghetto areas where many relocated Indian people tended to congregate. The organization made its first foray onto the Pine Ridge reservation in 1971 to protest the murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder in a nearby Nebraska border town. A mild-mannered, middle-aged Lakota laborer, Yellow Thunder was mugged, stripped and publicly humiliated, then beaten to death by a group of young white thugs. On the reservation AIM found a new constituency, much of it in the fullblood and traditional communities, and this served to legitimize their militant advocacy throughout Indian Country.

A year later, AIM again rallied in South Dakota to protest the killing of Wesley Bad Heart Bull, a young Oglala, in the border town of Buffalo Gap. This started a chain of militant actions in the Black Hills towns of Custer and Rapid City, then back to Pine Ridge. AIM was called to the reservation by a local civil rights group seeking recourse in the face of heavy-handed police tactics against the growing number of tribal dissidents.

When it appeared that AIM would return to Pine Ridge, Richard "Dick" Wilson, President of the OST Council, informed the media that they would not be tolerated and added, "If Russell Means shows up on this reservation, I, Dick Wilson, will personally cut his braids off." Under the leadership of Means, AIM did show up...and stayed.

The Goon squads were formed by Wilson, reportedly with funding from the BIA, initially as a "ranger" group to supplement federal and tribal police in maintaining law and order in the event of disruptions brought on by AIM. Although the term "goons" began as a derisive epithet by those who feared and loathed them, members of the group, in a gesture of arrogant levity, adopted the name as an acronym meaning "Guardians of the Oglala Nation." In the fashion of the Tonton Macoutes of Baby Doc Duvalier in Haiti, and the Dignity Battalion of Manuel

Noreiga in Panama, the Goons served as Wilson's personal militia to put down dissent by intimidation.

In separate books by Peter Matthiessen, and more objectively perhaps by investigative reporter Joe Starita in his book, "The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge," various fullblood and traditional leaders describe what the Goons' clean-up tactics entailed: these included unwarranted arrests, fire-bombings, arbitrary searches and seizure, brutal beatings, and gunfire.

In the first days of the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, I went to Pine Ridge, at the direction of the NCAI Board, to offer support to the Oglala Sioux tribal government and its president, Wilson. Tribes are the first line membership of NCAI, and we saw the Oglala Sioux as a tribe embattled by outside forces, and misrepresented in the reportage of the mainstream media. I enlisted the help of Leo Vocu, a longtime friend and my predecessor as NCAI Executive Director, and we worked to advise Wilson in political strategy and media relations. We tried to get him to take a more conciliatory stance, and to tone down his belligerent rhetoric. When he would agree to take our advice, he was swayed by his Goons back to a hard line, and goaded by the press to bellicose outbursts.

I returned to Washington dismayed at what I saw. From my time on that front I saw that the dissidents had ample reason for their rebellion. It was not only with Wilson, but many years running that they had endured neglect and abuse, all too often by their own government. Their cause was just, and they were being brutalized over their demands for justice.

The Goons' brutality hit home two years later in 1975 when my brother, Al Trimble, as a reform candidate, defeated Wilson for the tribal presidency. That campaign was bitter one. Trimble was able to rally the support of the fullblood and traditional communities, mostly in the outlying districts, against what he saw as the stranglehold of the colonial center at Pine Ridge. He faced physical violence, including an attack in a border town restaurant where he and his wife were having dinner. Later, two of his high school-age sons were beaten – pistol whipped, according to reports, at the hands of Goons. His car and those of his wife and relatives were tailed constantly, and were often stopped for perceived violations or non-violations. Evening hours and dinners at home were shattered by gunshots from passing cars, apparently driven by Goons.

In the four-month interim between Trimble's electoral victory and his inauguration, the tribal government offices and treasury were sacked. Goons were dispatched to Wanblee, a traditionalist stronghold and the Trimble family hometown, in a punitive raid to "straighten out" loyalists there who campaigned for him. The straightening-out included a hail of automatic weapons fire and a car chase that left one dead and another severely wounded.

Such was the clean-up work of the Goons.

It must be said that some, perhaps most, of those who made up the Goon squads, look back on those days with less than a sense of pride, some have expressed regret. Some have gone on to become respected tribal political leaders, others business leaders. But, for the sake of the Oglala Lakota and all Indian Country, the Goon squads must never be forgotten for what they were and

what they did.

Those were dark times of true and justifiable revolution. The tribal government survived, but the lessons were bitter, and the schism between mixed-blood and fullblood/trationals has served to all but immobilize governance and development to this day.

Should the goons be honored? Never!

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