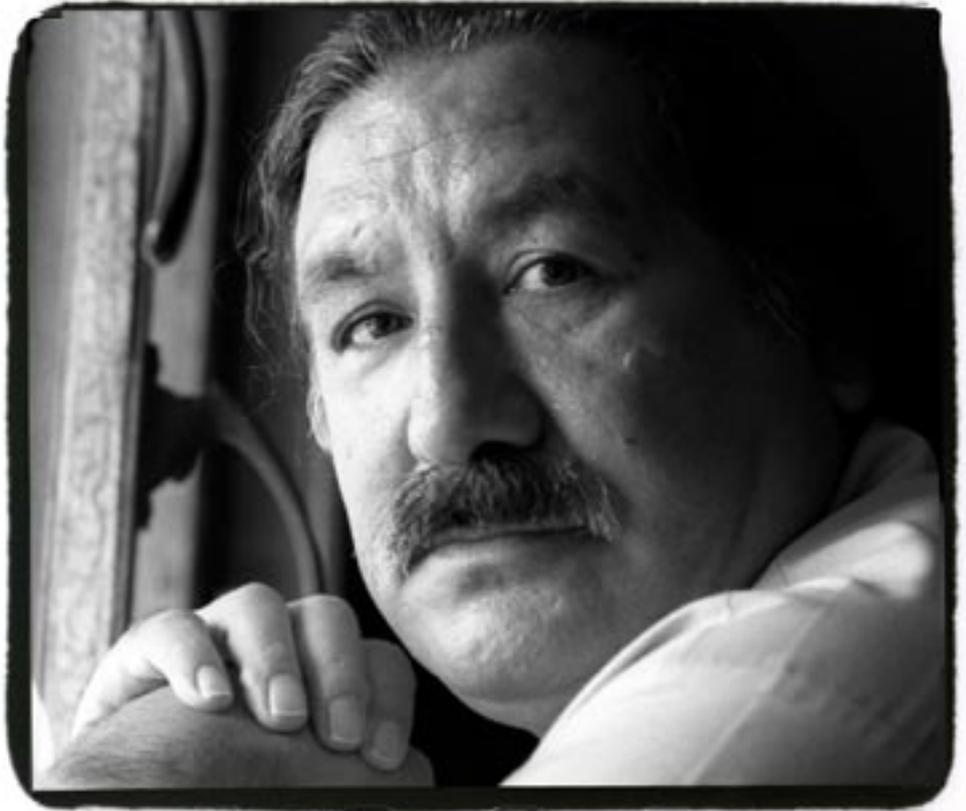


The Truth About Leonard

BY DAN FROSCH



WHEN KA-MOOK NICHOLS, A prominent former member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), testified last month that fellow activist Leonard Peltier bragged of shooting two FBI agents in cold blood, her words echoed throughout Indian country and beyond.

For the last 27 years, Peltier has languished in federal prison, convicted of killing those agents during a shootout on South Dakota's Pine Ridge reservation in 1975, much to the outrage of an international movement that believes he was framed. The incident occurred during a tumultuous period of violence between AIM, an Indian rights group working to improve conditions for Pine Ridge's impoverished residents, and a corrupt local tribal government backed by the FBI.

Now, Peltier's involvement in that crime is coming under renewed scrutiny as a result of Nichols' allegations. Nichols was appearing as a witness at the trial of a former AIM security guard named Arlo Looking Cloud, accused of murdering legendary AIM activist Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash in 1976. (Looking Cloud was eventually convicted, and another former AIM security guard charged with her murder, John Graham, awaits extradition from Canada.) Equally shocking was her subsequent testimony that implied Peltier also might have

been involved in Pictou-Aquash's killing.

Peltier is serving two life sentences for killing the FBI agents. He admitted to participating in the gun battle but adamantly denied prosecutors' claims that he executed Special Agents Jack Coler and Ronald Williams as they lay wounded. And virtually from the day of his conviction, a group of activists, politicians and celebrities have demanded his release, citing the unclear circumstances surrounding the shooting, the sham trial that ensued and the government's abhorrent treatment of AIM and the Indians it was trying to empower.

Strong denials

But Nichols' revelations have shocked many close to the case.

Specifically, she stated that in the months following the shooting, Peltier, speaking to Pictou-Aquash and her, said of one of the FBI agents, "The motherfucker was begging for his life, but I shot him anyway." With regard to Pictou-Aquash, whom some AIM leaders mistakenly believed was an FBI informant, Nichols said Peltier told her "he believed she was a fed and that he was going to get some truth serum and give it to her so that she would tell the truth."

Reaction from Peltier's supporters to both allegations has been swift and emotional.

On February 7, Peltier's lawyer Barry Ba-

chrach released a statement decrying the testimony of "paid informants"—Nichols conceded taking \$42,000 from the feds for moving expenses because she feared retribution—and three days later Peltier stated that hearing her words was "like being stabbed in the heart."

Robert Robideau, Peltier's first cousin and an international spokesman for the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, says he knows for certain Peltier didn't execute the FBI agents because he was there. (In 1976, with Peltier still on the run, Robideau and fellow AIM activist Dino Butler were both acquitted of murdering Coler and Williams.)

"It's totally false. I was one of the three individuals that was the first to be by the side of the FBI agents," said Robideau, who added Peltier was not with him. "I cannot deny that these agents were shot in the head at close range but they were not executed. They were killed in the heat of passion and they died like warriors. These were two armed groups fighting each other for different reasons."

As for the murder of Pictou-Aquash, Robideau insists any allegations of Peltier's involvement are "ludicrous," because, he says, Peltier was close friends with Pictou-Aquash and didn't get along with the faction of AIM that wanted her dead.

Acclaimed author Peter Matthiessen, who defends Peltier in his 1983 book *In The Spirit*

of *Crazy Horse*, also thinks Nichols' testimony is suspicious. "Leonard is suing the parole board right now and there's a lot of talk about a movie. I think the [government] will use anything to block his parole. I've always said the situation was murky and very excitable and that somebody either through panic or calculated judgment said 'Jesus, we can't let these guys live,' but that the FBI acknowledged long ago that it had no idea who that person or persons were."

Contrary evidence

But Nichols, even by Matthiessen's account, was a well-respected member of AIM, and she is hardly alone in her revelations about Peltier.

Noted Indian journalist Paul DeMain spent years defending Peltier and AIM through his newspaper articles but changed his position in 2002. His stunning shift was the result of his own investigations and the numerous people with knowledge about the case who he says came forward and implicated Peltier.

In late February of that year, on the heels of extensive interviews with his sources, DeMain published a series of stories in the paper he edits, *News From Indian Country*, alleging Peltier killed the two FBI agents and was privy to the hit on Pictou-Aquash. Peltier last year sued him for libel but DeMain expects the suit to be dismissed given Nichols' testimony.

DeMain now reveals that Nichols was one

of those who first contacted him and told him what she knew. He recalls, "When Ka-Mook told me that Peltier had gone into this dramatic reenactment of what happened, using body language and flashbacks, and how she and Anna Mae sat there spellbound and didn't say a damn word through the whole thing. . . . When I first heard Ka-Mook tell me this, it flipped my whole world upside down."

DeMain, torn about exposing a figure and a movement he long defended and haunted by Pictou-Aquash's death, says he believes there has been "some realignment going on" among Native Americans who have backed Peltier. "If you look at who's supporting him—Peter Matthiessen, Barry Bachrach—it's all these white guys who just won't let him go. He does still have some native people around him who've been essential in building up this myth about who he is."

Harlan McKosato, host of the syndicated radio show "Native America Calling" that devoted several shows to the Pictou-Aquash killing earlier this year, echoes DeMain's sentiment about a change in opinion. "There is a segment of Native Americans who were indifferent but tended to side with Peltier. These people are now being swayed by the new evidence and what seems to be a loss of AIM's credibility."

Karen Testerman, a fellow journalist, who grew up on Pine Ridge during the '70s, also called for Peltier's release but changed her mind after trusted sources on the reser-

vation told her what they knew. "It was like running into glass door you thought wasn't there. It was heartbreaking. When I told my 61-year-old mother, she took her 'Free-Peltier' poster off the wall and wept."

Both sides wait

One thing appears certain: With Graham's extradition likely to occur, pending a March 29 extradition hearing, more information undoubtedly will emerge.

On March 3, a few days after speaking with *In These Times*, Robideau resigned as international spokesman for the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee because of the organization's continued support of Graham—despite Robideau's strong belief that Graham is lying about his involvement in Pictou-Aquash's death and should be extradited.

"I won't be a party to the LPDC or to Leonard if he is not going to condemn these people," Robideau said. "This resignation does not change my position as to the innocence of Leonard in regards to the killing of the agents or the death of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash."

Whether the whole truth about Peltier, Pictou-Aquash and a movement that seemed to lose its way is not just revealed but accepted remains to be seen. ■

DAN FROSCH is an award-winning journalist based in New York whose work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, The Source and the Santa Fe Reporter.



Wounded Knee Timeline

Ridge. AIM activist Joe Stuntz and FBI Special Agents Jack Coler and Ron Williams are killed. AIM activists, among them Leonard Peltier, flee the scene.

FEBRUARY 27, 1973 A large group of AIM activists take over the village of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation, demanding improved civil rights for Indians. The standoff between AIM and local and federal authorities lasts more than two months.

JUNE 26, 1975 A shootout between the FBI and AIM members occurs on the Jumping Bull property on Pine

FEBRUARY 6, 1976 Peltier is arrested in Canada and eventually charged with the deaths of the two FBI agents, pending extradition.

FEBRUARY 24, 1976 Well-known AIM member Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash is found dead in a ravine on Pine Ridge, shot in the head.

JULY 16, 1976 AIM members Robert Robideau and Dino Butler, also charged with killing Coler and Williams,

are acquitted.

DECEMBER 16, 1976 Peltier is extradited from Vancouver to Rapid City, S.D.

APRIL 18, 1977 Peltier is convicted of murdering the agents and sentenced to two life terms.

NOVEMBER 3, 1999 Former AIM leader Russell Means announces that he believes AIM leaders Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt ordered Pictou-Aquash's death because they thought she was an informant.

FEBRUARY 2002 *News From Indian Country* runs the first in a series of stories that alleges Peltier shot the two FBI agents and might have known that Pictou-Aquash

was going to be murdered.

MARCH 2003 *News From Indian Country* runs an interview with Peltier with additional comments by DeMain reiterating the editor's stance.

MARCH 20, 2003 Former AIM security guards Arlo Looking Cloud and John Graham are indicted in the killing of Pictou-Aquash.

MAY 2, 2003 Peltier sues *News From Indian Country* editor Paul DeMain for libel.

FEBRUARY 6, 2004 Arlo Looking Cloud is found guilty in the murder of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash.

MARCH 29, 2004 Extradition hearing scheduled for John Graham.

ALL AGAINST ONE

BY DAVID MOBERG · BAL HARBOUR, FLORIDA

FOR DAN RADFORD, HEAD OF the Cincinnati Central Labor Council, the presidential campaign started last fall, long before Democrats had a nominee. And it will continue unabated throughout the year with more resources, more determination, more unity and a greater variety of tactics than ever before.

Reflecting the national labor movement's strategy and resolve, Radford's work in his crucial battleground state is based in a profound fear of Bush's reelection—a fear that already is producing glimmers of hope.

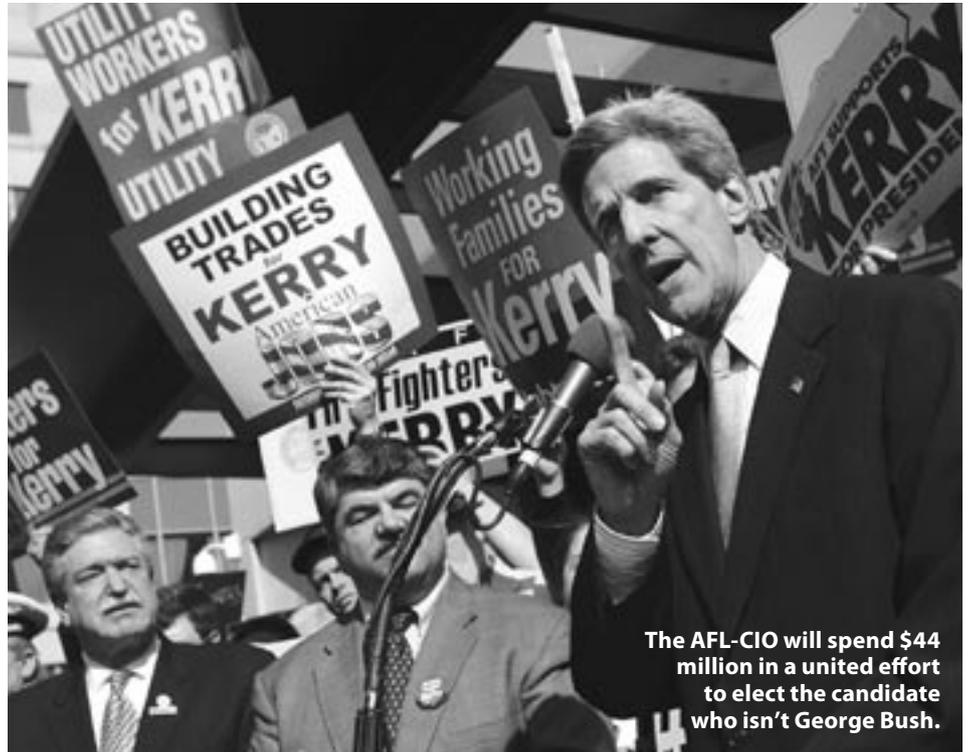
"Working families are frightened of this administration for several reasons," said Radford. "You take the issue of overtime [which could be eliminated for 8 million workers under new Bush administration rules]. They see their safety net being eroded. And they're more attuned to foreign policy. They're frightened about what's happening in Iraq."

Although Bush will try to win conservative areas of Ohio, like Cincinnati, with social wedge issues, labor there is keeping workers focused on kitchen-table issues, such as the loss of jobs, the shift of manufacturing and white-collar jobs overseas, and the growing healthcare crisis. But Radford's local labor movement also is strongly backing an initiative to overturn Cincinnati's unique ban on laws protecting gay rights.

Besides starting earlier, labor will have more than three times as many outside organizers working in Cincinnati, and members are being mobilized to campaign in their workplaces and in their neighborhoods. A pilot project of the AFL-CIO's Working America—recruiting nonunion households who share labor's general policy goals—already has signed up 35,000 local members. Other new voter education and registration efforts, such as America Coming Together, have labor support and complement union political activity. The work already has paid off, with a victory in a suburban mayoral race. "I'm more hopeful now than six months ago," he said. "I talked it then. I feel it now."

The determination and muted optimism were evident when the AFL-CIO Executive Council gathered in Florida in March. For working people, there is a crisis in jobs, healthcare, education, retirement security and future economic prospects, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said.

"During this crisis, Bush has been AWOL," Sweeney charged. "Bush has been the worst president for working people in recent memory. He has favored giant corporations over working families at every turn."



The AFL-CIO will spend \$44 million in a united effort to elect the candidate who isn't George Bush.

But that anger, combined with labor's early, sophisticated and targeted political program, Sweeney said, can help unions play a critical role in John Kerry's election bid.

Refining the focus

In the 2000 elections, labor households accounted for 26 percent of voters (36 percent in Ohio, which Gore narrowly lost after pulling his campaign out of Ohio in the last few weeks). That clout was the result of AFL-CIO efforts since Sweeney took office to boost registration, educate members on issues and get voters to the polls. This year labor is refining its program with a new focus on swing union voters—those who may shift parties or are vulnerable to Republican social issue pitches (on guns or gays, for example). Such members will be among many union members who regularly receive communication "sandwiches"—phone calls from union volunteers, followed by mailings, followed by calls discussing the mailing. The union pitch on economic issues makes a difference. Firefighters President Harold Schaitberger, the major early labor backer of Kerry, said that even though 44 percent of his members identify as Republican, roughly 62 percent to 64 percent have backed union-supported Democrats in recent elections. Already this year, he said, union political education had boosted Kerry support among members by nearly 15 percentage points.

This sophistication and the campaign's early start, will be backed