

Excerpted from: *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*, edited by Joy James

## **Chapter Twenty Two: Standing Deer** (pp 303-305)

Standing Deer (Robert Hugh Wilson) was born in Oklahoma in 1923. The son of an Oneida mother from Wisconsin and Choctaw father from southwestern Oklahoma, he learned to speak both Choctaw and Oneida, the languages spoken by his paternal and maternal grandmothers, respectively, before he spoke English. However, within the first years of his life, his parents forbade him and his two siblings from speaking any of their native languages and discussing their grandparents or the clans that were their heritage. By the age of six, Standing Deer, a light-skinned young boy living in a white neighborhood, attending white schools in Oklahoma City, learned to disassociate himself and his two siblings from other Native Americans around him and to think of himself as “white” and “American,” not “Indian.” When any of the students in his school called him an Indian, he fought them – following his father’s instructions – until they agreed to call him American. Yet, he maintained, he did not completely internalize the shame and self-hatred of his parents. Between the ages of twelve and seventeen he ran away from home several times, often to live with his father’s and his mother’s families and other Native Americans. But he no longer remembered the Oneida and Choctaw languages and customs of his very early childhood and so remained an outsider.

As a young adult, Wilson was arrested several times for a number of minor offenses and received his first prison sentence in 1963: ten years for interstate trafficking of counterfeit money. After his release in 1970, he was sentenced to another twenty five years in the state penitentiary in Oklahoma for armed robbery and larceny involving the theft of an automobile. During that sentence, he spent a year in solitary confinement for his involvement in a prison riot on July 27, 1973.<sup>1</sup> He escaped on April 29, 1975, when he hijacked a bus transporting him to another prison and remained underground until police apprehended him in Chicago on April 6, 1976. At that time, Robert Wilson was a notorious and skilled bank robber, and his prison records reflect that prison and state officials considered him dangerous (he routinely assaulted officers who tried to apprehend him).<sup>2</sup>

After his arrest in Chicago, Wilson faced indictments on seven felony charges in the western and midwestern United States, including a June 3, 1975, bank robbery in Oklahoma City that resulted in a near-fatal shooting of a police officer. Wilson faced up to seven life sentences for interstate transportation of stolen jewelry and bank robberies. Along with an accomplice, Steven Berry, he was sent to the United States Penitentiary super-maximum-security prison in Marion, Illinois. While in the Marion prison, Wilson suffered from degenerative disc disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. In March of 1978, he was in the prison hospital under treatment for his chronic back problems when, according to Wilson, Dr. J. Plank at the hospital approached him to help the chief correctional officer, Max Carey, monitor Leonard Peltier. A Lakota and member of the American Indian Movement (AIM) also imprisoned at Marion, Peltier was then and remains now one of the most prominent political prisoners in the United States. Wilson refused, and Plank returned him to solitary confinement. On May 5, the increasing degeneration of his back culminated in Wilson falling in the shower and being unable to force himself upright. Within days, Carey visited him, offering medical treatment in exchange for his cooperation against Peltier.

On May 17, 1978, according to Wilson’s account, Carey entered his hospital room with a well-dressed white man who claimed that he could obtain medical treatment and parole for Wilson if he would help “neutralize” Leonard Peltier.<sup>4</sup> Further discussion elicited the intent behind Peltier’s “neutralization”: Wilson would befriend Peltier through the prison’s Native American cultural group, convince Peltier

that he had the means and materials to help him escape from prison, then, prison officials would kill Leonard Peltier during the escape attempt. Wilson would be provided with zip guns, wire cutters, a hacksaw, materials to make dummies, and any other components needed to prove that he could help Peltier escape.

That day proved to be a turning point in the life of Robert Hugh Wilson, who would soon reclaim the name of "Standing Deer" that his grandfather gave him during childhood. Wilson agreed to his role in the plan. Oklahoma authorities dropped the warrants that they held on him and on June 1, they canceled the pending trial. After his discharge from the hospital, Wilson had his first chance to meet Leonard Peltier, whom he had not previously supported, on July 4, 1978. In *Coming Home*, an excerpt from a public message that he wrote in 1994, Standing Deer relayed the significance of meeting Peltier: "[That] transformed my life, brought me home to my People, and put me dead in the middle of the political struggle for the survival of my People."<sup>5</sup> He describes the events of that and the following day as a spiritual and political cleansing and transformation. As he approached Peltier that day, he could sense the love, respect, and commitment Peltier radiated and recognized his scars as piercings and flesh offerings from the Sun Dance (a sacred Lakota ceremony outlawed by U.S. institutions such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Prisons). Wilson confessed his role in the government plot to assassinate Peltier. The next day, Leonard Peltier and another Lakota man escorted Wilson to an empty room in Marion's law library. The other man produced a rope and bandanna that he used to bind and blindfold Peltier in a chair before he left the room. According to Wilson, Peltier instructed him to barricade the door with a bookcase, then verbally directed him to a fifteen-inch knife hidden in a bookcase. Wilson recalls that as he picked up the knife:

The knife turned into a snake in my hand, and as I stared paralyzed it became the face of the blond, blue-eyed stranger [the unnamed agent who accompanied Carey] who wanted Leonard dead. As I looked into the blue eyes, I saw the face of the man who murdered my grandfathers and grandmothers. I was terrified, but when I looked at Leonard he was smiling, and I could hear his smile and it sounded like a gentle waterfall. I could no longer see through my tears, but I heard the waterfall say, "Do whatever it is you have to do, my Brother." And I fell to the floor and cut his bonds and removed his blindfold and he had tears in his eyes that looked like a rainbow.

The events in the library marked an epiphany for Wilson. He pretended to continue with the assassination plans and joined the prison's Native American culture group. His oratorical and organizational skills quickly led to his promotion to chairperson and spokesperson for the group. Standing Deer became an active and outspoken advocate for prisoners and political prisoners, in particular for their religious, physical, medical, and intellectual and educational rights. Seeking Native American religious rights, medical access for chronically ill patients, and an end to forced labor for elderly inmates, Standing Deer continuously sent letters of protest to prison officials, and supporters and families of prisoners, to challenge what he termed "the dungeon" of "America's gulag."<sup>7</sup> Released in September 2001, he lived with his wife in Houston, Texas. Standing Deer was murdered in his home on January 21, 2003.

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**Violence and the State** (Abridged) (pp. 307-310)  
by Standing Deer

The violence thing is what really has my head spinning. If violence is "the imposing of a set of conditions on another party without regard to the other's interest, or without sensitivity to their situation" then by that definition, I have been the victim of state-imposed violence all my life and not just the twelve years I have recently spent in prison .... In a way, I feel like my education is just beginning because so sheltered have I been that these ideas on violence have not been available in any writings I've been able to get past the censors in these maximum security pigsties I've lived in all these years. Let me say again I haven't read Ward Churchill's paper "Pacifism as Pathology" and I would very much like to<sup>1</sup>. I'm not opposed to violence, but the support for violent action of any kind has always been absent in positions I have read while condemnation has been overwhelming. .

I live in this prison where all my information comes out of the mind-destroying, capitalist-promoting, thought-stealing TV, and the brain-washing, propaganda-spewing daily papers. If you could sample the *Tulsa World*, *The Daily Oklahoman*, and the *McAlester News-Capital* for thirty days, plus be bombarded with the constant blathering about how [President Ronald] Reagan is a subversive who loves niggers and has packed the U.S. Supreme Court with Communists. So far to the right are these people that it is exhausting just keeping myself reasonably sure what my own beliefs are. I'm enclosing a couple of letters to the editor columns to accent what I mean about the political climate in Oklahoma (as if you didn't know). The guards are another 360° to the right of these newspaper views.

I read with fascination turning to amazement the three paragraphs Mike Ryan devoted to Native Nations on page sixteen.<sup>2</sup> I, of course, agree that Native Nations exist, that the Dine Nation has a large land base rich in natural resources, that the Dine are poverty-stricken, ill-educated, without jobs, have an outrageously high infant mortality rate, and all the rest of it. And, of course, I agree that this situation must be changed, .but I had no idea that American Indians are in a position to cripple North American imperialism. I would have thought that if the Native Nations appeared to be in a position to deprive the United States of crucial resources, the Indians would be stepped on like so many bugs. Neither would they let us do it through their courts since their laws are carefully designed to prevent just such a happening from ever taking place. If there was a violent movement formed, it would consist of about twenty percent FBI agents and undercover Indians; there would probably be no more than five percent of the total Indian population involved in the liberation struggle, and they would be branded the lunatic fringe. Many of our own people would turn against us after Jane Pauley and Bryant Gumble explained to them that we were Communists or worse. Since we are so easily identified by our skin

color and appearance, they would, if they felt it necessary, bring into play the ultimate discourager as the prosecutor at [Nelson] Mandela's trial said: "If any threat to white rule were to arise, the shooting of 5,000 natives by machine I gun would provide quiet for a long time." And it would. Mostly because that would be just about the number of us involved. Then it would not be necessary for Euro-american radicals to implement their position as to what they would do to support us, for we would no longer exist.

Just because American Indians can be fit into Joseph Stalin's conceptual scheme defining a nation doesn't make us any more unified than the nation of the dominant culture that oppresses us.<sup>3</sup> But the State's ability to command discipline and obedience from the worker ants who would be called upon to dispense their violence is so total, and the weapons of destruction available to them are so awesome that unity becomes a moot point for the State. But unity is indispensable to our side, and we have none.

Being around the Indian brothers here in Oklahoma has been an experience. Outside of Ben Carnes and Harry Hall I haven't met a single one who knows anything about the struggle in general or [the American Indian Movement] AIM in particular. Most of the brothers are racists hating whites and Blacks almost equally with a slight edge going to whites. Many of them believe AIM has caused a lot of trouble for our people. If they have any religion it is Christian. Many believe long hair is worn by trouble-makers. They are nearly all anxious to learn what I have to I teach them about our struggle, but it is hard because they have been taught to assimilate. Getting along with the white folks is their first priority, and they are timid about expressing their new-found political consciousness to other brothers for fear of ridicule; The "Indian Leaders" in Oklahoma think folks like me and Ben and Harry should be put to death for stirring up "trouble" in the minds of the other Indians. I'm not speaking hyperbole. David Hilligoss knows a lot about how the "Indian Leaders" think about us down here at the prison because Dave has tried in vain to organize some sort of support for us among the Oklahoma Indians<sup>4</sup>. There is none. I can't even get Indians as verifiers on my application for exemption I want to file to keep my hair from being forcibly cut.

I sit in my cage and listen to my yuppie/buppie news programs on TV and the I country seems to be rushing to the right. Then I read my Guardian and Worker's World and find a world frothing at the mouth for socialist change. I wake up each day in an intellectual vacuum, and I have no way to test reality. I still have sense enough to know the Republicrats offer no solutions with their big, serious presidential election. But isolated as I am, I can't decide if the talk about violence is serious . or if it is theoretical and will remain forever so. I know you can't organize a violent response to oppression unless you do it in such tiny cliques that it would almost surely be ineffectual. Because of the secrecy required (in this day and time when children are trained to turn their mothers over to the police for smoking marijuana, and where block wardens are being organized in some big cities to act as "Snitch Central," where members of the community can report the suspicious activities of their neighbors) they would have to remain too remote to develop the "from the masses, to the masses" relationship out of which could germinate the revolutionary politics necessary for support of violent action. I feel like I'm missing something. I love the idea of violent response to State violence, but I am so afraid that the funerals would mostly be ours and I can't see what it would achieve. I want to read Churchill's paper. Maybe then it will make more sense to me.

If it seems I don't know what I'm talking about it's because I don't. I feel like I'm in a dark room looking at things going on in a room with bright lights but I'm separated from the light-filled room by a sheet partition. I can see all of you as shadows, but can't quite make out what is happening in your room. I wonder if Ward and Mike are looking through their own sheet out onto the sun-filled world and seeing a little more definition than I. I have been around people – when I was in Marion Prison –

who knew so much about radical politics that it was easy to get so caught up in the redolence of revolution that I'd forget that in real life on the outside, revolutionaries were actually quite scarce.

People who think as we do are rare and I don't like it. If only there were more of us. You've heard about the National Geographic Society study that was done by the Gallup organization in May? Forty-five percent of Americans are unaware that apartheid is the government policy in South Africa; forty-seven percent are unaware that Israel is the site of conflict between Arabs and Jews; fifty percent are unaware that Nicaragua is the country in which the Sandinistas and contras are in conflict. One American in seven cannot identify the U.S. on a map of the world! My next door neighbor thinks Boston, Massachusetts, is in Texas (somewhere down around Houston). I'm not kidding.

Before ya'll think I mean to be the purveyor of doom and gloom, please remember that the thought of violence makes me happier than two dead dogs lying in the sun, but I just believe "the time is not right." Conditions are more than bad enough, but I would like to sit in on a strategy and tactics session and hear just how such a response can be organized and implemented without the police neutralizing our group before we get to first base. I know most of the students and intellectuals who took Huey P. Newton's advice on attacking the enemy in their communities are either dead, in jail or have become militant Republicans. They will let you talk about violence so long as your propaganda and agitation appear to be abstract and idealistic. They will even let you print intellectual discourses about it. It's just doing it that they won't let you do.

#### NOTES

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1. Editor's note: Ward Churchill's essay is fully titled *Pacifism as Pathology: Notes on an American Pseudopraxis*. It appears in the larger volume by Ward Churchill and Mike Ryan, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 1998). Churchill first wrote the essay in 1986, arguing for the necessity of Violence in strategic revolutionary organizing. While pacifism promises that nonviolence can transcend the racism and imperialism of state power through purity of purpose, argues Churchill, the universal application of pacifism is counterrevolutionary and defends or reinforces the power apparatuses that it opposes. According to the authors, violence is a necessity for state transformation just as it is a daily reality in the lives of Third World and U.S. minorities who experience the brunt of racialized state violence.

2. Editor's note: The author refers to the second of two essays that comprise *Pacifism as Pathology*.

3. Editor's note: According to Joseph Stalin, "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." Josef Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1935).

4. Editor's note; David Hilligoss, PhD., is a speaker on tribal rights, professor emeritus of Native American Studies, University of Illinois, and Native News Service correspondent and producer.