

30 years after Pine Ridge killings, Peltier case becomes ``dead issue"

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In the nearly three decades he has spent in federal prison, Leonard Peltier has gone from indigenous activist to federal inmate to international icon.

Convicted of the murders of two Denver FBI agents who died in a June 26, 1975, shootout with members of the American Indian Movement on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Peltier has won the sympathy of untold thousands around the world.

They believe he was wrongly convicted in 1977 - worse still, that he was framed by an avenging federal government.

But today, as a group of Pine Ridge residents and Peltier supporters gather at the nearby Jumping Bull ranch to commemorate the 30-year anniversary of the deaths of AIM activist Joe Stuntz and FBI agents Ronald Williams and Jack Coler, there are signs that Peltier's celebrity could be fading.

At Native America Calling, a call-in Web and radio talk show produced in Albuquerque, the phones haven't rung with Peltier callers in more than a year.

"About two years ago, there was a real big movement," said Patty Talahongva, a Hopi and the managing editor and host of the show. "But I haven't seen hardly any activity lately."

Peltier advocates today struggle to catch the interest of the media, said Russ Redner, who, having joined AIM in 1968, "knew Leonard before he was Leonard." Redner now serves as the executive director of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee in Lawrence, Kan.

"It's very difficult," Redner said from Lawrence last week. "Nobody wants to look at the issue, because they consider it a dead issue."

To be sure, many Peltier supporters remain steadfast in their devotion to the man they describe as living proof of white America's encroachments on native sovereignty.

"To my generation, he's a symbol of freedom," said Vic Camp, a young activist on Pine Ridge whose parents have been active in AIM. "We never give up on him. We believe in his innocence, and we want him to return to his people and live the rest of his old life out as a free man."

But Peltier's case has been eclipsed by broader, more pressing concerns among Native Americans, said Kevin Washburn, an enrolled member of Oklahoma's Chickasaw Nation and a professor at the University of Minnesota Law School specializing in Indian law.

"It's a far greater tragedy that the Black Hills have been stolen from the Sioux than that one man sits in a prison cell somewhere," he said.

Peltier also has had numerous appeals and post-conviction hearings, Washburn noted. This month, Peltier's attorney, Barry Bachrach, argued in a Fargo, N.D., courtroom that Peltier had been improperly charged under statutes that are not applicable on reservations such as Pine Ridge.

Washburn, a former federal prosecutor, said such an argument has failed in other cases.

Though they have refused to grant Peltier a new trial, higher courts have certified some of the problems in his case.

"Much of the government's behavior at the Pine Ridge Reservation and in its prosecution of Mr. Peltier is to be condemned," a panel of judges at Denver's 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled most recently, in 2003. "The government withheld evidence. It intimidated witnesses. These facts are not disputed."

Retired FBI agent Ed Woods, who spent his career investigating organized crime in New York and now maintains the No Parole for Peltier website, said he had planned on attending today's commemoration at Jumping Bull but canceled after seeing a pamphlet that didn't mention Coler or Williams.

"It's turned into a Peltier pep rally, and there's no way I'm going to go to that," he said.

Camp, who said he would be attending today's ceremony, said Wood misunderstood the purpose of today's event.

"We are not going to celebrate," he said. "That is a day of mourning. We pray for all those who fell that day. They did not need to die."

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