Native Americans occupied the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island. The occupation lasted for nineteen months and sparked a wave of Indian protests across the nation (Smith and Warrior 18, 109). The sudden influx of direct action and aggressive political protest by Indian activists become known as the Red Power Movement and generated unprecedented national publicity for the plight of Native Americans. Among those captivated by the movement's tactics was a young Cherokee wife and mother named Wilma Mankiller, who would later become the first female principle chief of the Cherokee Nation. The movement's emphasis on independence and reconnection with tribal heritage emboldened Wilma Mankiller to leave her troubled marriage and enter into tribal politics, where the lessons she learned from the failures of aggressive and ideological leaders, such as Russell Means, allowed her to develop a successful, pacifist, and practical style of leadership.

The Politicization of Wilma Mankiller

The federal government's relocation policies did not make assimilation into modern American society easy for Wilma Mankiller. In 1956 she and her family left their home in rural Oklahoma for the better life the Bureau of Indian Affairs promised would await them in the city of San Francisco. Unaccustomed to life in a big city, young Mankiller often felt isolated and embarrassed because she spoke with an accent and had to be taught basic skills such as how to use a telephone (Mankiller 103).

Mankiller's future started to look brighter in 1963 when she married Hugo, a wealthy immigrant from Ecuador. Her relationship with Hugo allowed Mankiller to travel and experience a side of city life previously unavailable to her. The pair rented a home in a quiet neighborhood of San Francisco and had two children. Hugo worked for an airline while Mankiller stayed at home with the children (Mankiller 145-150). It appeared that Mankiller assimilated into mainstream culture after all and was living the American dream.

Despite having the comfort and security of a stable home and family, as the strength of the Civil Rights Movement increased, so did Mankiller's desire for independence. She spent her free time wandering the streets of San Francisco, which by the late 1960's became a gathering place for radical reformers. Mankiller related to the struggles of the city's minority groups and became a strong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement. Hugo disapproved of Mankiller's politically active friends; he enjoyed feeling as though he had saved her from a life of poverty and desired for her to remain at home and within his close circle of friends. However, the political activism going on around her caused Mankiller to become restless. She dreamt of an opportunity to "rebel against a lifestyle [she] had come to believe was too narrow and confining [and] to experience all the changes going on around [her]" (Mankiller 202). When Native Americans seized the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island in 1969, Mankiller knew the moment she had been waiting for had arrived.

The bold rhetoric used by the occupation's leaders gave Mankiller a sense that anything was possible and encouraged her to push for greater independence. She visited the island and worked at the Bay Area Indian Center to provide behind the scenes support to the movement (Mankiller 193). Hugo continued to disapprove of Mankiller's interest in Indian activism. However, the Red Power Movement gave Mankiller the courage to realize that she "did not have to live a life based on someone else's dreams" (Mankiller 159). Therefore, when Hugo denied her request to purchase a car to travel to tribal events, Mankiller went against her husband's wishes and bought a used red Mazda. The purchase symbolized the first time that Mankiller took necessary risks in her "battle to gain control of [her] own path and create [her] own destiny (Mankiller 212). From that point forward, developments in the Red Power Movement showed Wilma Mankiller that her battle for independence could be won.

Tribal independence was not the only goal of the Red Power Movement. Many of the movement's activists came from families that had accepted the government's incentives for relocation. As a result, many urban Indians spoke no tribal languages and lacked knowledge of ancient ceremonies or customs. To the young urban Indians, separation from their tribal heritage amounted to the "theft of something priceless, irreplaceable, and with it came a smoldering resentment they felt nearly every waking moment" (Smith and Warrior 199). Wilma Mankiller identified with the movement's push for reconnection with tribal heritage. Although Mankiller had maintained