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Free My People

An Interview with
Russell Means

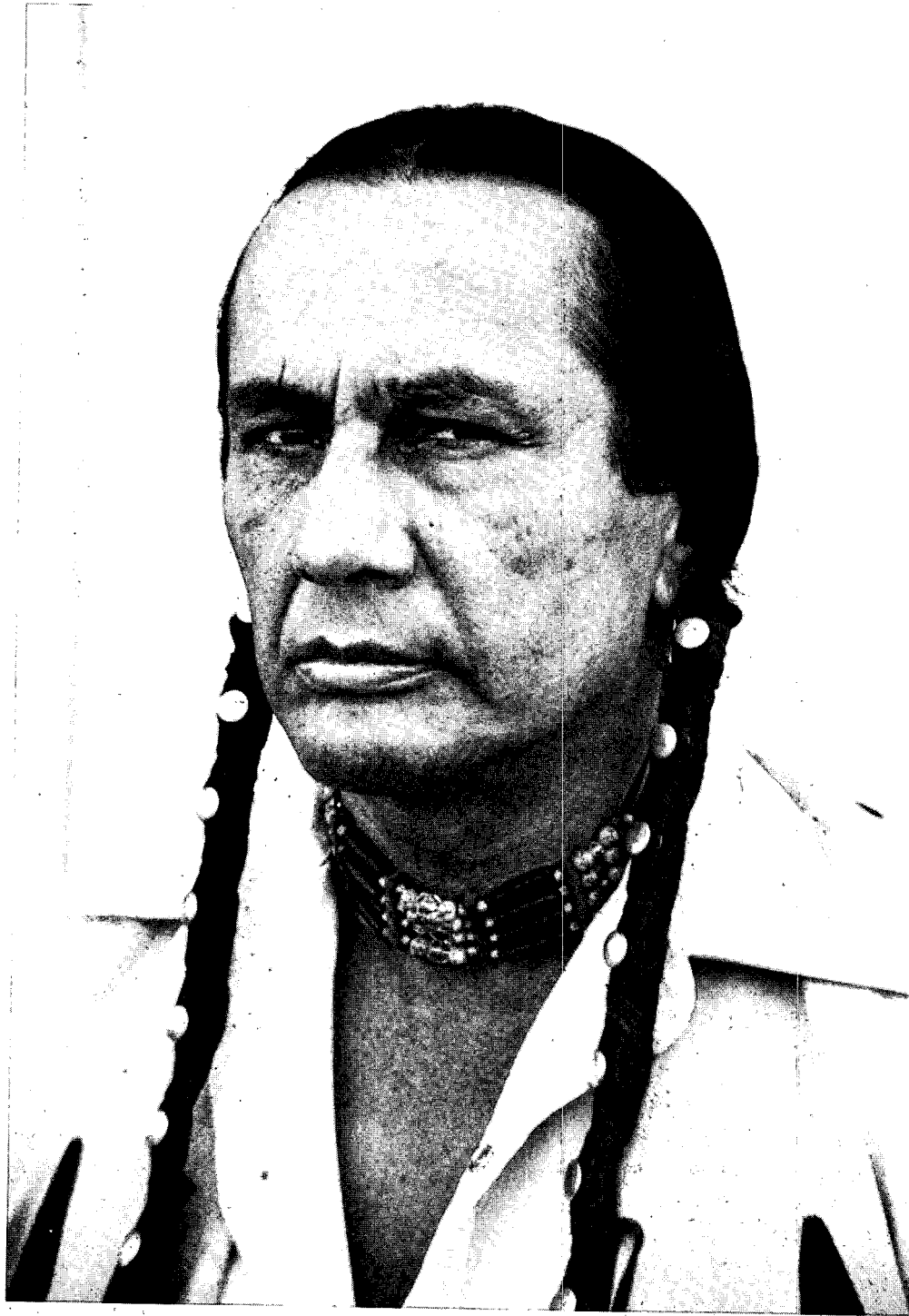
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William Niskanen
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Photographs by Larry Dodge

Russell Means

On the western rim of the small valley that shelters the remote Pine Ridge Indian Reservation town of Porcupine, South Dakota, sits the log building that is home to 46-year-old Russell Means, leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM).

Means's house is just up the road from Wounded Knee, where in 1890, 200 Indians were massacred by a Seventh Cavalry intent on avenging the death of George Custer. Eighty-three years later, Wounded Knee made news of a different sort, when Means led hundreds of Indians in a 71-day occupation of the town, demanding that the US government honor an 1868 Indian treaty. (The government refused.)

Russell Means, an Oglala Lakota Sioux, was born on the Pine Ridge Reservation but spent much of his childhood in Oakland, California. He worked his way through Arizona State University and became a CPA and a rodeo rider.

In 1970, Means established the Cleveland chapter of the nascent American Indian Movement; he rapidly became, along with Chippewa Indian Dennis Banks, AIM's charismatic co-leader. The group's principal demand was, and is, self-determination for the Indian people. To this end, Means has recently taken up the cause of the Indian resistance in Nicaragua (and taken a shrapnel wound in the process).

Means has attracted considerable

notoriety for the company he keeps. In recent years, he's teamed with Hustler magazine's Larry Flynt in a short-lived campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, appeared at Madison Square Garden with Muslim dissident Louis Farrakhan, and traveled to Libya to confer with Muammar Qaddafi.

With his long, braided hair, traditional clothing, and incendiary rhetoric, Russell Means "came to stand for almost everything... the authorities feared and resented about AIM," author Peter Matthiessen has written. He is a bit less fearsome in a domestic setting: during the interview, Means played with his 14-month-old son, Tatanka, bathed him, and even searched with him for a tiny, misplaced moccasin.

Russell Means was interviewed at his Pine Ridge home by Montana businessman and writer Larry Dodge.

Reason: You're currently involved with the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua. In what way?

Means: I've made two trips into Nicaragua. One last year and one this year. I went in last November and was only in for two days, and went back in on January 8th of this year.

Reason: What did you find?

Means: The Indian resistance has been going on there for five years—longer than any of the *contras* have been in existence—under the leadership of the

organization called Misurasata. Virtually the entire Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, that's all Indian territory. And Creole territory. Creoles are the blacks. Misurasata has allied itself with Creoles. And there are dozens of Ladinos also fighting. A Ladino is a Nicaraguan that is not Indian and not Creole.

Now the first time I went into Nicaragua, in November of last year, because I had no documentation, these leftists said my visit had no credence, and what I was saying hadn't any credence, because the CIA was manipulating the Indians. But that in itself is racism. They're saying that Indian people have no mind of their own, and we can be manipulated by the right and the left. At their whim! That we have no brains!

Now first you have to understand the Miskito-Sumo-Rama Indians of Nicaragua. They are a self-sufficient community, self-sufficient people. They live in their own villages governed by the village leaders, and each village has its council of elders. Their schools are all taught in Miskito. Their books are written in Miskito languages. Historically, they have driven off the Spanish, and they drove off the English from their lands. Even Somoza left them alone.

Self-sufficient people who plant their own food, who don't depend on the monetary system, have a proud history, fish, harvest natural or wild crops, and hunt for a living are not a people who give up their land—for any reason. Understand? Self-sufficient people you don't mess with. Anywhere in the world. Everyone knows this. And every military person will always attempt to ally themselves with self-sufficient people—except when you're an Indian, because

you're such a primitive savage.

Self-sufficient people, independent people...you can't say, "I'm going to free you." You can't say, "You come to my system of government and you'll be free." What are you talking about? I've been free since I've been on this earth! Sandinistas made that mistake.

First of all, they sent in Cuban teenagers to say, "You have to learn Spanish and Spanish only in your schools." So wait a minute, we've got our own Miskito, and we're only going to teach Miskito. That's the first mistake they made. And the second mistake they made was that they took the arms away from the Miskito people. In other words, stating to the Indian people that they don't trust them. And because they couldn't trust them, they destroyed 58 villages along the Rio Coco [the river that forms the northern border]. And then the armed struggle began.

They've been fighting for over five years without any international aid whatsoever from any source. Their arms, ammunition, uniforms, boots—they take them off the Sandinistas themselves. These people are pretty tough. They have two to three thousand warriors inside Nicaragua. Hundreds of Sumos, a couple hundred Ramas, a couple hundred Ladinos, and hundreds of Creoles. Then the rest of them are Miskitos.

Reason: Why did you make your most recent trip in January?

Means: The second time I went in we stayed 30 days. When we went into Nicaragua, we didn't sneak in under the cover of night like thieves. This is Indian country. We went in like *Indians*. In broad daylight, from the ocean. Talk about apprehension! For 14 days, we walked and canoed all over the essential areas of Nicaragua, and we did not worry about any informant. If you're having guerrilla warfare going on, and you're walking around for two solid weeks, without ever worrying about an informant, you would have to conclude that this must be a massive Indian resistance.

We visited with the leaders of 28 villages, and the councils of elders, and we documented the atrocities. Not one village escaped the atrocities in the systematized genocide from the Sandinistas. And it was only because of the strength of the warriors that the atrocities began to cease, but they're still ongoing today.

What the Sandinistas did in virtually every Indian village was to come in and force the adults into the church. And



Non-Indians in this country, you talk to them and they say, "Oh, what happened to you, isn't it a shame. That was our ancestors, not us." Bull! It's happening today, in a more insidious manner.

...y turned that church into a torture chamber, where they would tie their hands behind their backs and force them to lie on the floor of the church face down. From 9 to 19 days, without allowing them to go to the bathroom or eat or drink water. So consequently, many people died.

They raped the women in front of their men. And they forced the leaders to go house-to-house and watch the soldiers rape the women. They took the young girls and made them do beastly acts, and then they went and took the boys, 12 to 16 years of age, to the local schoolhouse, where they burned them alive and machine-gunned them.

Reason: How would you have the United States get involved, or are you asking for the United States to get involved?

Means: Okay, now we both know that the Sandinista government *and* the United States government are denigrating Misurasata and [its leader] Brooklyn Rivera. Why? Because anyone who takes over will have to deal with these self-sufficient Indians. And the Creoles. They all desire self-determination, and they are not fit to participate in a totalitarian

state or a state controlled by corporations.

Reason: And the United States?

Means: From the United States. The reason I'm involved is to convince the United States government to ally itself with Misurasata. That means that they would be forced to re-look at the Indian condition of *this* country, and look at us as human beings. And so the future for my child brightens, the future for all Indian children becomes brighter.

Reason: There are people speculating that you are trying to broaden your power base by appearing to be internationally concerned.

Means: The only reason is for the future of our children. The Sandinistas are trying to compress 200 years of US Indian policy into a decade of Nicaraguan.

Vine Deloria, Jr., said it best in his book *Custer Died for Your Sins*, when he said words to this effect: "Until the United States learns to treat its Indian people with justice and fairness, its foreign policy will always be a failure." The Nicaraguan policy is the epitome of that example. What a failure in their foreign policy they are. Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia, you go around,

and you'll see... Cambodia, Laos, Afghanistan. They're beginning to wake up in Afghanistan, and all we're saying is that the freedom fighters *inside* Nicaragua deserve the same consideration that freedom fighters anywhere in the world deserve.

Reason: What is it like being an Indian in America?

Means: You're faced with an institutionalized racism that is absolutely devastating. It's institutionalized from the time that you enter the school system to the end of your life. The very basis of it is that we are still primitive, savage pagans, who have to be eternally taken care of, and we are not worthy to become partners in contemporary life, because we're not smart enough.

Reason: What is the American Indian Movement? What does it want?

Means: What AIM wants is self-determination for our people, and a leave-us-alone policy. We've found the best route towards that is the elimination of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We are the only people that's governed by a bureau of the federal government. It should be an insult to any decent human being that this country, in this day and age, still has a bureaucracy that governs a specific ethnic group per se.

Reason: What kind of political system do you think would or should be adopted among Indian groups that achieve sovereign status as envisioned by AIM? Would it be all the same, or would they...

Means: That's a very difficult question, and that has to be left to each locality as they see fit. Let me put it this way: The Indian people of today are in a period of transition. Fifteen or 16 years ago, Indian people weren't wearing beadwork and didn't have long hair, and they were not wearing any Indian jewelry. In fact, 16 years ago, the only people you saw with Indian jewelry on were rich white people who happened to buy some Navajo and Pueblo turquoise and silver jewelry. But the cultural revolution that we went through in the last decade and a half has brought a new sense of self-dignity and self-pride and therefore a new awareness of what Indian people can do in the contemporary world. Culturally, spiritually, politically, and economically.

Reason: That was my next question. What kind of economic systems do you envision would go with this kind of sovereignty?

Means: In order for our value system to

maintain its beauty, it would have to be based upon the individual with concern for the collective welfare and well-being. So in essence, it's a continuation of our ages-old system—individual entrepreneurship based upon the good of all.

Reason: Does the idea of gambling on reservations fit into the picture? I know that has gotten a big start in Southern California and Arizona...

Means: All over the country.

Reason: How do you feel about that, coming from the Sioux reservations?

Means: When we challenge the white man, we like to challenge the white man. Gambling is *our* oldest profession.

Reason: Would you be satisfied with governments at all levels deregulating Indian affairs, abandoning existing distinctions, and treating Indians like any other US citizens?

Means: We are *not* US citizens. There are many, many Indian people who prefer that legal term. In fact, probably the majority of the people who have Indian blood in them would prefer US citizenship. However, traditional Indian people have never accepted US citizenship. We're the only people in the history of modern civilization where citizenship was forced upon us without our consent. We're treated separately, based upon the fact that we're "primitive."

My platform was to get rid of every federal agency and state agency on this reservation and we'll do everything on our own. I mean overnight—there wasn't going to be any gradual transition.



You know, there has only been one other government in modern history that has defined purity of blood as a measure of who you are as an individual—and that was Nazi Germany. And this country defines Indians by blood quantity. You talk to non-Indians in this country, and they say, "Oh, what happened to you, isn't it a shame. That was our ancestors, it wasn't us." Bull! It's happening today, in a much more sophisticated, insidious manner. It's called colonialism, and this country is a—sad to say—master of colonialism.

You take the fishing and hunting rights controversies, where these sportsmen are against the Indians. All of the "rednecks"—and you know, I resent that term, because that is denigrating my color as a red Indian of the Western Hemisphere. They're not rednecks, they're *pinknecks*. One only has to look at their necks to see that they're *pink*. And these pinknecks throughout America are attacking our treaty rights, our hunting and fishing rights, and wanting to make us US citizens. First of all, they have to realize that we live under 5,000 to 6,000 more laws, rules, and regulations than any other person in the United States of America lives under, and they try to say that we're US citizens. We're not US citizens! We're more regulated than any person in the United States.

Reason: Let's change the tack for a minute here. AIM's moment of greatest notoriety came in 1973, when you led the occupation of the town of Wounded Knee. Did anything good come out of Wounded Knee?

Means: Wounded Knee was the catalyst that served, universally, to push the cultural revolution, not only in this country, but also in Canada, and all throughout the hemisphere. The cultural revolution has turned to activism and is a continual search for our rights to self-determination. And Wounded Knee—the good that it has produced for this country and therefore the world—is immeasurable. After Wounded Knee, the international community woke up to the fact that we are alive and well, and still struggling for our rights.

Reason: What do you think a hundred years of welfare and reservations have done to Indian character?

Means: Decimated Indian character. I see Indian people without will. When you have no will, of course, the result is all of the constant horrors of poverty that we suffer from. We are at the bottom rung of every ladder, and any, scale of

measurement of poverty. The poorest counties in the United States, the very poorest counties, are Indian reservations. Our infant mortality rate in this country is higher than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. And that means Guatemala, that means Mexico, that means Brazil, that means every place in the Western Hemisphere.

Reason: Like the rest of us, you have troubled youth.

Means: Oh yes. But the Indian youth are even more troubled. It's been proven in educational study after educational study that Indian youth, in the first and second grades, are scholastically superior to non-Indian youth. I repeat—scholastically superior to non-Indian youths. Beginning in the third grade, the scholastic abilities begin going downhill. And it's because of the institutionalized racism against the Indian people. When you're taught that your country was discovered by a white man, when you're taught that your mother and father are pagan savages who scalped and attacked wagon trains, etc., none of it being the truth, of course, your feelings of self-worth and self-dignity suffer greatly.

Reason: And that affects your scholastic achievement.

Means: Oh, definitely. For someone to tell you that Columbus discovered America, when the truth is, he washed up on the beach in the Caribbean. *We* discovered it. And he and his entire crew were suffering from the ills of Vitamin C deficiency, scurvy and what have you, and we nursed him back to health. And he wasn't looking for a country called India, because there was no country called India in 1492. What is now called India was then referred to as Hindustan. The other thing is, he spoke Italian, and Indian is a bastardization of a colloquial word in Italian meaning "Indio," *Dio* in Italian meaning "God," and *Indio* meaning "in with God." He wrote in his ship's log, "Indios... are people in with God."

Now, our treatment as human beings would be vastly different if, instead of bastardizing the Italian word *Indio* to *Indian* in the English language, they really did the correct translation and called us "in with God"—"Hey, there goes 'in with God.'"

Reason: When you were young, did you play cowboys and Indians?

Means: Of course. When we played cowboys and Indians in Southern California, my brother and I, we always played the Indians, and we always won. You see, when we'd go to movies and see the



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cowboys-and-Indians movies, we always felt bad. Whenever you heard the classic bugle sound, and the cowboy would charge at the end of the movie and wipe out the Indians with one shot—John Wayne would be the winner—we really felt bad, and so we'd go home right after the movie and we'd play cowboys and Indians. And we would always win. We had all of the white kids in the neighborhood wanting to be Indians, because they didn't want to be on the losing side.

Reason: Is there any realistic chance that the US government will accede to AIM's demands?

Means: Well, first of all understand that the American Indian Movement is not advocating anything new. All we are doing, in the best way that we can, is to reiterate what our ancestors and elders say. We managed to live in a country that is not overpopulated, didn't have prisons, didn't have locks or keys—it might be called primitive, but we didn't have any mortgages to worry about or Visa cards or American Express. It might be called primitive, but we settled our differences without the shedding of much blood. It might be called primitive, but we didn't draw lines on a piece of paper and say that you cannot cross those lines. If we had, of course, the Europeans would still be suffering in an overpopulated Europe.

Reason: Well, at this point, do you expect to get anything out of the government? You suggested, for example, sovereignty. Do you think you'll get sovereignty?

Means: The only way you'll get sovereignty is by implementing it yourself. And by living by the values that our people have always lived by. We've never asked for the government to do anything. All we said is that we are human beings and therefore we are worthy of partnerships with all the other sacred colors of the human race. And until that world view becomes reality, we are always going to be an oppressed people. Do you realize that we're the only color of the human race that's not allowed to participate at the table of the family of nations? The black, brown, white, and yellow all participate in world affairs on an equitable basis. Only the red are forbidden. That fact should incense any decent-thinking man. And it's not even given a thought.

Reason: Is it racism, or is it the fact that in most cases, the red nations are subjugated within other nations which presume to represent them?

Means: Let's deal with that fact of representation. Look at you, the non-Indian. You have local representation at the municipal level, you have area-wide representation at the county level, you have regional representation at the state level, and you have national representation at the federal level. Look at us Indians. Who represents us? The only representation in this country that we have is in the Department of Interior, where gravel is given more consideration than we are because they see immediate economic benefits. Now I want to point out how the Southwest and other areas of the country have seen economic value in the Indian culture.

Reason: Are you talking tourism and things like that?

Means: No, I'm not talking about tourism—that's another insult. We're the only thing in the United States of America that's considered a tourist attraction, and we're human beings for Christ's sake. We're not dressed up in costumes for any stage show or frontier show. We're everyday living, breathing people who live and work to the best of our abilities—when we're allowed to—and yet we're considered tourist attractions. I mean, people come to a reservation not to look at the badlands, they come to look at living, breathing human beings and either marvel at their feathers or the poverty-stricken, backward way of life, as they see it.

Reason: Well, taking your own operation, your own bid to do something politically, you've been kept off the ballot

in your recent bid for the presidency of the Oglala Sioux Nation by your opponents, who insist that convicted felons [Means was convicted in connection with Wounded Knee] can't run.

Means: Well, you've had felons in the White House. The real reason I couldn't run is because I was running on the independence ticket. My platform was to get rid of every federal agency and state agency on this reservation and we'll do everything on our own. And I mean overnight—there wasn't going to be any gradual transition. And we were going to look to the international community for assistance. I said assistance, not aid. There's a difference in asking for a hand rather than a handout. And that's what the Indian people and the American Indian Movement are essentially after—a hand, not a handout. I know that's an old saying, but it's very apropos here.

So consequently, it just scared the living daylights out of the United States government and these colonized Indians, and they wouldn't let me run. That's what government will do to you when they make you wards, afraid to stand up on your own two feet, afraid to stand up on your hind legs.

Reason: The Indian rights movement has largely been ignored by the American left. Why?

Means: The political left in this country is really no different than any other segment of industrial society, in that everyone has their favorite Indians.

Reason: You mean tribes, or types of Indians?

Means: It has nothing to do with tribes. It is their *favorite* Indians. Everyone has their favorite Indians so they can utilize them and exploit them. Missionaries, federal government, Republicans, Democrats, leftists, conservatives. You name it, everyone is going to have their favorite Indians. Every time they meet someone that is independent and sovereign unto themselves, they denigrate them and name-call. The left in this country is the worst example of that.

Now, I've found something peculiar. Maybe it's too soon to judge, but I've found that the sophisticated people of the world, the ones who are comfortable with themselves as human beings and are demonstrating their own sovereignty and belief in it, are the ones who respect Indian people—actual Indian people like our ancestors. As Indians, we have our own agenda, and it's not left or right. It is Indian. And as long as you respect us, we're going to respect you. And the ones



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that I have found, curiously enough, that have given us the most respect, have been the conservatives. They might not like us, but they respect us, because we stand up for our own agenda. The left hates that. If you're going to stand up for your agenda, they will start name-calling.

Reason: You recently appeared on stage with Muslim dissident leader Louis Farrakhan in New York City. Do you endorse Farrakhan's message?

Means: That's a loaded question. What is his message to you? I hear completely different things from him than do Zionists, for example. So do responsible Jewish people who aren't alarmed at this man. At any rate, I have hung around with many elements of the non-Indian fringe. From Farrakhan to Larry Flynt the pornographer...

Reason: To certain Libyans...

Means: To Qaddafi, to the World Peace Council, to a myriad amount of the fringe elements of contemporary industrial society. Now hanging around the fringes, as the American Indian Movement leader, I have been searching everywhere to find a friend for American Indian people. At first I thought it was the Christians in America. The liberal Christians. Then I found that not to be the case. Then I thought it was the black politicians. Then I found that not to be the case. We went to the peace movement. And we found that we were not welcome. Then we went to the white left. And more so than any other group, we were used by the leftists. All under false

pretenses. All for their benefits. Totally for their agenda.

Because of my experience in the '70s, the conservatives were calling me a lackey for the Communists. In 1980, I realized that the leftists and Marxists of industrial society were more efficient racists. I then went to the fringe element because I felt that the conservatives didn't ever want me, because they had been saying that I was a lackey for the Communists. Of course, now I am considered a lackey for the CIA by the leftists. Maybe by the 1990s, I'll be considered a lackey for the Indians. That is my hope, because I consider myself an American Indian patriot. That is all I want and all I hope to be.

The point is, at Madison Square Garden I got up to give a speech before Farrakhan came on. And I challenged his organization to become partners with Indian people on the Indian land—because he was espousing rhetoric to that effect, and I felt that he should live up to some of his rhetoric. At that moment I was dropped, and he went to his favorite Indians that he has dress up and sit on a stage for him.

Reason: Do you think...

Means: I've always felt that whatever the non-Indian community thinks of me, or says about me, isn't a priority in my life. What is important is the well-being of the people. And if I can improve, in any way, their condition in life, then I'll be able to stand the heat.

And if I happen to be the center of controversy, so be it, as long as the issues of Indian people come down. There are people on the left who will say that I will go so far as to get wounded to get publicity. Such as I planned my trip to Nicaragua to get wounded in the bombing attack. Thank God the Sandinistas went along with my plan! I was worried there for a while, they wouldn't bomb the village that I was in. They'd say, "No, Russ, you're going to use it for your own publicity purposes." But I was able to dupe the Sandinistas into bombing us.

Reason: That was a good piece of work. Two final questions. Do you have any heroes?

Means: Only my ancestors.

Reason: Are you optimistic about the future?

Means: Of course. Indian people are always optimistic. The world is a place of optimism. We know that life will always flourish. Our question is, is the human species going to be part of that flourishing? □