WAYS and MEANS; OVER FOUR DECADES, Russell Means has led an insurrection, posed for Andy Warhol, aspired to be an assassin and been arguably the most influential public figure in fighting racism against the American Indian. Now, in his quest to start his own country, the road to success might run down Embassy Row.

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Body

The voice was booming and imperious as it came out of the bathroom, wafting over the blandly hip decor of the Dupont Circle hotel room. Ã'If you excuse me a moment,Ã“ said Russell Means, Ã'I'm going to braid my hair.Ã“

I knew that Means was not talking about some quick twist-and-tie ponytail job, but rather the painstaking culmination of a resplendent costume. Means is 6-foot-1, with a powerful broad-boned physique. He is the actor who played the last Mohican in the 1992 film Ã'The Last of the Mohicans,Ã“ and he is the onetime leader of the revolutionary American Indian Movement, or AIM. Arguably the most famous living Indian activist, he performs his role with panache. Already on this bright, cold morning in February, he was wearing dangling turquoise earrings, a crimson wool Navajo vest and black silver-tipped cowboy boots. His broad, truculent brow was creased with wear.

Means'***s*** life has been something like a Johnny Cash song. He has done prison time for inciting a riot, and has been stabbed, accused of murder, hit by two bullets and divorced four times. Long ago, he was a fancy dance champion and a rodeo star. Even now, at age 68, he remains a forceful presence -- a warrior.

On this visit to the nation'***s*** capital, Means was, per usual, fighting the ***United States*** of America. Along with three other Lakota Indians, he had recently severed his ties with the ***United States*** and declared himself a founding member of a new, autonomous nation -- the Republic of Lakotah. Unsanctioned by their tribal government, and speaking only for themselves, the dissidents claimed dominion over more than 93,000 square miles of traditional Lakota territory -- a continuous chunk of sparsely populated dry land that includes parts of Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming.

Means was here in Washington seeking diplomatic recognition from the world community so that he could ultimately finagle a seat at the United Nations, whether the ***U.S.*** of A. likes it or not. His motto, borrowed from Gandhi, is, Ã'First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.Ã“

The plan was to barnstorm Embassy Row. He hoped to visit ambassadors from several ***U.S.*** adversaries (Venezuela and Serbia, for instance) as well as from a few other countries he deemed likely allies -- for instance, Bolivia, which has an indigenous president in Evo Morales, and Finland, which, in Means'**s** view, Ã'appreciates freedom because it'**s** always been an independent ally of Russia.Ã"

It would be a four-day mission, and Means was traveling with an attache, Lakotah'**s** volunteer attorney general, Jerry Collette. A Libertarian activist and a paralegal who recently emigrated to Lakotah from his longtime home in North Carolina, Collette is most renowned for the intricate, loopholing legal work he did last winter to enable the supporters of presidential candidate Ron Paul to fly a campaign blimp up and down the East Coast. Ethnically French-Canadian, Collette is 56 years old, with long gray hair and a shaggy gray beard. In contrast to Means, he is a meager physical presence -- slender and only 5-foot-4. On this road trip, as Means luxuriated on the hotel'**s** single queen bed, Collette was sleeping on the floor. Ã'I'm a guerrilla,Ã" he explained, Ã'and if you're a guerrilla, you just don't grumble about little discomforts.Ã"

At the moment, Collette was standing outside the bathroom, valet-like, reporting on the progress he'd made that morning, canvassing embassies on his cellphone. Ã'I called Iceland,Ã" he said, Ã'and they can't meet with us. They're busy. They said to just drop off a petition.Ã"

Ã'They're busy?Ã" Means asked. Ã'What does Iceland have to be busy about?Ã"

Collette paused a moment, and then, without answering, he said, Ã'But can we just drop off the petition?Ã"

Ã'We're too busy,Ã" Means said, his voice laced with a larksome, sardonic swagger, and Collette went back to his phone, squaring away the logistics for a full afternoon of visiting embassies.

After a few minutes, Means emerged. His braids were done, and now he reached for his sunglasses -- Dolce & Gabbanas.

Ã'Well, then,Ã" said Russell Means, Ã'are we ready?Ã"

The first embassy of the day was East Timor, which is actually not on Embassy Row but rather in a nondescript office building near the Van Ness-UDC Metro station. Means and Collette took the elevator to the fifth floor. The Timorese suite was dimly lit and sparsely appointed, new-smelling. East Timor is a fledgling Southeast Asian nation that is still adjusting to independence after having been occupied, from 1975 to 1999, by neighboring Indonesia, whose military caused the death of more than 100,000 Timorese people, or roughly 10 percent of the population. The ambassador, Constancio Pinto, 45, spent much of his adolescence running from bombs, sleeping in caves and subsisting on leaves. A small, dapper man in a black business suit, he greeted the Lakotans genially. Ã'Welcome,Ã" he said. Ã'You are our first visitors.Ã" From Lakotah, he meant.

They went into the conference room, and then Means spoke dryly, without referring to notes, telling Pinto that the ***United States*** is now occupying Lakota country illegally, in violation of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which granted the Lakota control of the Black Hills in western South Dakota. The treaty was repealed by Congress in 1877, and the Lakota have struggled ever since. Ã'We are the poorest people in America,Ã" Means said, Ã'and we have the shortest life span in America, too. The life expectancy for Lakota women is 47; for a man, it'**s** 44. After 155 years of genocide, our way of life is on the brink of extinction. We have finally decided to withdraw from the ***United States*** and save our people and our lands. Here is our petition.Ã"

Means handed Pinto a slim portfolio that consisted of a two-sentence cover letter followed by many pages of excerpts from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, among other documents. For a moment, Pinto read silently. Means sat with his legs crossed, his chin canted back. His air was not disrespectful, but it was vaguely proprietary. On the wall behind him was a framed photo of ***U.S.*** soldiers happily drinking beer in East Timor. This was surprising because, as Means had reminded me earlier, the ***United States*** had generously supported the Indonesians during the war.

Ã'I know that the ***U.S.*** facilitated the genocide of East Timor,Ã" Means said now. Ã'I do understand the complexities of the world, and I understand the imperialist monster that is the ***United States*** of America.Ã" He paused; there was an awkward silence. Ã'But they can't bomb Lakotah,Ã" Means said. Ã'We have too many white people living among us.Ã"

Pinto looked up. Ã'Um, as you know,Ã" he began, Ã'we are trying to put the war behind us. It was a very painful process. So many people died. Eighty-nine percent of our infrastructure was destroyed. Our whole country was leveled, and now we are trying to rebuild. The ***U.S.*** has been very supportive. Over the past five years, they have been our biggest donors of aid.Ã"

Ã'Really?Ã" said Means. He was shocked.

Ã'Yes, they have given us up to $25 million a year. I will give this petition to the capitol, in Dili, butÃ" -- Pinto laughed, a bit nervously -- Ã'I can assure you that my government will not take a position.Ã"

There was a minute or two of closing niceties. Outside on the sidewalk, Means said, Ã'I loved his straightforwardness.Ã"

I said it was shocking how many people East Timor lost in the war.

Means sneered at me. Ã'On the continental ***United States*** in 1492,Ã" he said, Ã'there was 12 to 14 million people -- Indians. And according to the 2000 census, there were just 250,000 full bloods left. We've lost 99.6 percent of our population.Ã"

His math was a little shaky. For one thing, Census statistics indicate that in 2000 there were 2.5 million ***U.S.*** citizens who claimed no ancestry other than Ã'American IndianÃ" or Ã'Alaskan Native.Ã" But I said nothing.

We kept walking, and, as Means descended the stairs into the Metro station, wearing the Dolce & Gabbanas again, a woman passing by did a double take.

Russell Means became an American icon in 1973. As a telegenic and quotable front man for AIM, he starred on TV as 250 Native Americans took over the sole church in tiny Wounded Knee, ***S***.D., and seized control of the town, which sits amid the desolate brown hills of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. For 71 days, even as the National Guard'***s*** armored tanks lurked in the pine trees and federal helicopters whirred overhead, spraying sniper fire, Means and his fellow Indians held their ground, bearing but a few old shotguns and hunting rifles as they burned down Wounded Knee'***s*** grocery store and flew the American flag upside down.

The conflict was a reprise of an earlier, symbolically potent battle -- an 1890 massacre that saw the ***U.S.*** Cavalry kill more than 150 Lakota men, women, and children. Wounded Knee II was a feud over what it means to be an American Indian. For much of the preceding century, the nation'***s*** indigenous people had been forcibly assimilated. They'd been legally denied the right to practice their religious rituals -- the sun dance, for instance -- and shepherded into government-run boarding schools where white administrators cut the students' long hair and forbade them to speak their native languages.

For some Indians in the early 1970s, the indignities were manageable: They harbored hope that in time the ***U.S.*** system could accommodate them -- that tribal governments, which answer to the Department of the Interior, could incrementally improve life for Native Americans.

Other Indians saw no such hope. Taking cues from the Black Panthers, they decreed that it was time to get radical, to proudly and violently assert their racial identity. These radicals saw their assimilationist counterparts as sellouts -- or Ã'half-breeds,Ã" as Means puts it -- and in 1972 they found a target for their ire: Dick Wilson, the newly elected Pine Ridge tribal chair. A crew-cut Lakota prone to frothing with hatred for communists, Wilson bore a special animus for Means. At one point, he threatened, Ã'I, Dick Wilson, will personally cut his braids off.Ã"

In AIM'**s** view, Wilson was a puppet of the ***U.S.*** government. In the early days of his administration, he gave the Feds a large chunk of the Pine Ridge reservation, Sheep Mountain, that was coveted for its uranium and molybdenum deposits. In turn, the attorney general'**s** office sent 65 ***U.S.*** marshals to keep the peace on Pine Ridge, by surrounding the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building there at gunpoint.

Wounded Knee II was a retort -- a fiery demonstration calling for Wilson'**s** removal. The ***U.S.*** government was there to defend Wilson as legitimate. Means played a valiant David to the Fed'**s** Goliath. At one point, he announced to the surrounding forces: Ã'You're going to have to kill us. I'm going to die for my treaty rights.Ã" The press reveled -- and lingered long on Means'**s** hairy past.

Raised near San Francisco, the oldest child of a physically abusive Lakota mother and a Lakota father who struggled with alcoholism, Means burglarized stores and stole wallets from bar patrons before discovering AIM in 1969. Then, he resolved, as he put it in his 1995 autobiography, Where White Men Fear to Tread, Ã'never again would I seek personal approval from white society on white terms. Instead Ã‰ I would get in the white man'**s** face until he gave me and my people our just due. With that decision, my whole existence suddenly came into focus.Ã"

In 1972, in Washington, Means helped lead 300 AIM affiliates in a six-day occupation of the BIA building -- a gambit that saw the Indians smashing the bathrooms and offices, toppling file cabinets and Ã'repossessingÃ" Indian paintings, pottery and rugs. Soon after that, he protested the killing of a fellow Lakota by leading hundreds of Indians to a demonstration at the county courthouse in Custer, ***S***.D. There, he gouged a police officer in the eye. A nearby chamber of commerce building burned to the ground.

After the Custer riot, he was out of jail the following day -- Ã'just in time,Ã" as he gloats, Ã'to see national television coverage.Ã"

The 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee failed to deliver clear-cut glory, however. Means fled the battle zone under the cover of night, and the last of his followers soon surrendered to authorities.

To some Native Americans, the whole campaign was little more than misguided theater. This February, Tim Giago, founder of the Lakota Times, a newspaper, wrote that Ã'an entire village was pillaged and destroyedÃ" without AIM ever spending Ã'a single dollarÃ" to repair the wreckage.

But Wounded Knee had a ripple effect. It brought anti-Indian racism into the newspapers and prompted a measure of social change. Sixty-six-year-old Lorraine White Face, who lives on Pine Ridge, says: Ã'Before Russell Means took over Wounded Knee, the stores in [nearby] Nebraska would have signs on them saying, 'No Indians Allowed.' You couldn't go to the movies or a cafe. After Wounded Knee, all that changed.Ã"

America'**s** romance with Indians surged, and, in his defiance, Means seemed like a reincarnation of such Lakota legends as Sitting Bull, Rain in the Face, Gall and Crazy Horse. When Means went to court in the wake of the Wounded Knee mayhem, Marlon Brando and Harry Belafonte showed up, voicing support. (Means was found not guilty of burglary and larceny charges.)

Then, in 1976, Andy Warhol invited Means to New York to sit for a portrait. In Warhol'**s** silk-screen, Means is fierce, staring straight out of the frame. He wears a white bone neck choker and what looks like a brown leather rawhide robe. An imaginative viewer can almost hear buffalo thundering away out on the Plains. But still in Warhol'**s** silk-screen there is something ***fake*** and disquieting about Means'**s** face. It'**s** a mask-like splash of tan paint. The image is reminiscent of the cheap coloration in long-ago Sunday comics pages. The caption, Warhol seems to be telling us with a wink, could read, Ã'Wild Indian, Authentic.Ã"

At our first interview, over breakfast, Means was surly from the get-go. Within five minutes of shaking my hand, he accosted me for my Ã'[expletive] white racist arrogance. There'**s** only one reason you people came to this continent,Ã" he said. Ã'Greed! We Indians have our spirituality. We have our land, but Americans have no culture except greed.Ã"

I changed the subject, asking Means how many Lakota backed his independence claim. Ã'That'**s** not germane,Ã" he barked. Ã'In all my years of international relations, not once has anybody ever questioned my sovereignty. Even if I am only speaking for myself and my brother, and I'm not, my sovereignty exists. It'**s** spelled out in the treaties.Ã"

Eventually, ***I'd*** learn that Means has only six or eight active Lakota supporters scattered throughout North and South Dakota. Many other Lakota quietly share his contempt for the ***U.S.*** government; some even long for a return to the hallowed days of Lakota independence. And, while Means won 46 percent of the vote when he ran unsuccessfully for Pine Ridge tribal chair in 2004, he has not endeared himself with his desperado-style secession.

Ã'I'm a little frustrated that he just went ahead and went to Washington,Ã" says Alex White Plume, a bison rancher who serves on the Black Hills Sioux Nation Treaty Council, which fights for Indians' land rights. Ã'It'**s** not like he came up with a brand-new idea. We've talked about separating from the ***U.S.*** at treaty council meetings. No traditional Lakota wants to be colonized, and actually I wanted to bring a group to Washington myself. But I wanted to bring thousands. Russell didn't build that kind of consensus. He never even sat down with our traditional elders.Ã"

Ã'Russell didn't do the protocol,Ã" echoes Floyd Hand, also on the treaty council. Ã'What I do is, I make people welcome at a meeting. I buy everybody some meat and vegetables and fry bread. Russell went solo.Ã"

AIM is more severe in its critique of Means. In a press release, it has called him Ã'clownishÃ" and has taken pains to note that Means has Ã'resigned from the American Indian Movement at least six (6) times, the latest on January 8, 1988.Ã" No one from AIM would comment for this article.

But, for Means, the burned bridges behind him simply show that he'**s** nobody'**s** lackey. He'**s** free, and freedom is his foremost priority. He calls his republic the Ã'epitome of liberty,Ã" promising that, once it'**s** up and running (and that could take decades, he says), it would issue its own licenses and passports as it allowed its citizens a tax-free existence. There would be no police and no jails. The economy would be based on wind power.

Ã'We get enough wind in our country to power the entire ***United States*** 24 hours a day, seven days a week,Ã" he told me. Ã'We've formed an LLC, legal under ***U.S.*** law, and we're going to join with large coal companies. We'll go to individual landowners, both Lakota and non-Lakota, and lease their land and put windmills on them. We have a business plan.Ã"

Means refused to share it, though. He was more interested in talking about Lakotah'**s** government, which, he said, would be matriarchal. Ã'A lot of people think that just means that women run everything, but that isn't right,Ã" said Means, who is, technically speaking, the chief facilitator for Lakotah'**s** provisional government. Ã'Matriarchy is where you celebrate the strengths of each sex. Both men and women know their roles. People get along.Ã"

Lakotah would not be a democracy but rather a consensus-based system. Ã'Individual liberty through community control,Ã" is how Means described it. Ã'Everybody has a right to be racist, but their behavior is regulated by the posse comitatus.Ã"

Means argued that American Indians flourished for centuries in matriarchal societies. Ã'I quote,Ã" he said, holding a single index finger aloft, Ã'the great Indian scholar Vine Deloria Jr.: 'The disagreement between Indian nations was largely without the spilling of much blood. It was about as dangerous as a professional football game.' We lived, from the top of the Arctic down to Tierra del Fuego, in harmony, without any disease. It was Heaven on Earth. Then you guys ruined it.Ã"

There was a bit of the thespian about Means, and I kept thinking of perhaps his most cerebral Indian foe -- Chippewa novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor, who has written: Ã'We're all invented as Indians. We're invented from traditional static standards, and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts.Ã" Vizenor holds that, even as they live in contemporary society, playing bingo and using computers, Indians find their identity shaped (and limited) by what white Americans think Indians should be -- that is, savage, and appointed with cool moccasins and colorful headdresses.

There'**s** a timeworn tradition of Indians capitalizing on the white man'**s** fascination -- Sitting Bull and Gall signed on as part of Buffalo Bill Cody'**s** traveling Ã'Wild WestÃ" show in the late 19th century. Vizenor sees Means as the new standard-bearer for this sort of hokum. Means, he says, is Ã'the media man, a master of simulations, a comical spectacle.Ã"

A large question seemed to hang over Means'**s** visit to Washington. Was this jaunt down Embassy Row in earnest? Or was it just a little performance art -- a trick to kick up a rhetorical dust storm?

Means didn't answer the question, but he relished it. Ã'What did Shakespeare say?Ã" he asked, his face alight with a grin as he spread his arms wide. Ã'All the world'**s** a stage.Ã"

The meeting with Venezuela was promising. I was not allowed to attend, but afterward Collette emerged burbling: Ã'They're ready to invest. They just want to see a business plan so they can arrange something with Citgo to start developing alternative energy out in Lakotah.Ã"

Bolivia was, by the Lakotans' lights, a smashing success. Ambassador Gustavo Guzman, who is suave and lean, with his long hair pulled back into a ponytail, wore bluejeans and greeted Means as an old friend. Alone among nations, the Bolivians had sent a delegation to support Means when he and fellow secessionists announced their declaration of independence in Washington last December. (Bolivian President Evo Morales is Indian, as is roughly 55 percent of the Bolivian population.) Ã'We respect the rights of Indians everywhere,Ã" Guzman told me, Ã'even though we cannot take an official position on the Republic of Lakotah.Ã"

Uruguay'**s** ambassador to the ***United States***, Carlos Gianelli, was a regal older gentleman with a crocodilian smile; his office was finely appointed with burgundy leather chairs and a mahogany desk. When Means proffered him the petition, he said: Ã'Fine, then, we'll study this and send it to Montevideo. We don't have many indigenous people in Uruguay, as you know, but we are hopeful for cultural exchanges.Ã"

Means was elated. Ã'Now that'**s** what I call sophisticated,Ã" he said in the elevator.

But the visit to the Finnish Embassy was doomed from the moment Means entered the building, a glass, steel and concrete minimalist masterpiece known as the Ã'Jewelry BoxÃ" of Embassy Row. It was early morning. A cold gray light bore down through the bounteous windowpanes. The ambassador was out. Means met instead with the second secretary of political affairs, a young woman named Soile Kauranen. Perhaps because it was early, Means was in particularly testy form. Ã'I could care less who recognizes us,Ã" he told Kauranen. Ã'Whether Finland recognizes us or not, we're already free.Ã"

Kauranen, who wore a light charcoal pantsuit and modish, clear-framed eyeglasses, spent much of the time assiduously scribbling notes on a legal pad. Her posture was erect, and her questions shimmered as small, pointillist pricks at Means'**s** reeling monologue. Ã'And, uh, how many people in your country?Ã" she asked. Ã'And how many hectares is it?Ã"

When Means and Collette had answered to Kauranen'**s** satisfaction, she said, Ã'Thank you, gentlemen,Ã" and ushered them out. They began moving down Massachusetts Avenue on foot, eventually coming upon a grand plaster-faced building adorned with a blue cupola. This was once the Iranian Embassy, but now it was vacant and dilapidated, with cracks in the walkway and weeds everywhere in the yard.

Ã'Look at that,Ã" Colette thrilled. Ã'We could discover it -- you know, the doctrine of discovery!Ã"

Means stood on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets as he surveyed the property. Ã'It could use a front lawn,Ã" he said.

They pressed on, and a few moments later Means shouted at Collette: Ã'Will you stop walking right in front of me? God!Ã"

Collette moved to the side -- and then, as we continued toward Dupont Circle, he delivered portfolios to various embassies while Means waited at the curb. They hit Brazil, South Africa and Lithuania.

I wondered what, beyond mere recognition, Means wanted from this odd and sundry collection of countries. Was it aid?

Ã'No,Ã" he said. Ã'You saw that guy from East Timor. He can't say a word because the ***U.S.*** is greasing him. We don't want aid. Does the ***United States*** get aid? Does Germany or Japan? No. The ***U.S.*** has been throwing Indians aid for over a century, and it'***s*** killing us. What we need is investments. We want to open things up, so that companies from all over the world can do business with us, without having to comply with the onerous laws of the ***United States*** of America.Ã"

For many observers, Russell Means'***s*** current rhetoric calls to mind another aging warrior -- King Lear. Means'***s*** harshest critics hold that he'***s*** now just fulminating delusionally -- and that in fact he'***s*** been an ineffectual figure for more than 30 years now. Ã'Ever since Wounded Knee, Russell has seemed more and more like a blind man with a Rubik'***s*** Cube,Ã" Laura Waterman Wittstock, a Seneca Indian and Minneapolis-based journalist, has said. Ã'The older he'***s*** gotten, the less coherent his career seems. He'***s*** been frantically hunting around for a new identity and saying, 'Is this it? Is this it? How about this?' Ã"

Means has wandered most in the realm of politics. In 1984, when Hustler publisher Larry Flynt attempted to run for president on the Republican ticket, Means joined him as the vice presidential candidate. That same year, he traveled to Libya to cultivate an alliance with Moammar Gaddafi. He befriended Louis Farrakhan, eventually, and became so enamored of Sun Myung Moon'***s*** Unification Church and its evasion of the IRS that he did a lecture tour on the church'***s*** behalf. In 1988, he ran for president himself, as a Libertarian, narrowly losing the party'***s*** nomination to Ron Paul. Meanwhile, he built his cinematic r{Zcaron}sum{Zcaron}.

After appearing with Daniel Day-Lewis in Ã'The Last of the Mohicans,Ã" Means played a Navajo medicine man in Oliver Stone'***s*** Ã'Natural Born Killers.Ã" Then he ***provided*** the voice of a sage elder, Powhatan, in the Disney animated film Ã'Pocahontas.Ã" He kept his hand in Lakota issues. He helped found a community-funded health clinic on the Pine Ridge reservation. Twice, he tried, unsuccessfully, to get himself elected tribal chair.

But then in 2006, he says, his life attained focus as he was driving near his home on Pine Ridge. On a whim, he collared five young pedestrians -- 20-somethings -- and asked them to define the word Ã'freedom.Ã"

Ã'I sat down on the ground, and I listened to them,Ã" Means said. Ã'And none of them -- not one -- could define freedom. And the only thing they knew about me was from the movies. That absolutely scared the hell out of me. When I came to the reservation in 1972, everyone spoke Lakota. They knew about their ancestors. In 36 years, we've gone from a Lakota way of life to a poverty way of life. I started to wonder: 'How do we save ourselves? How can I leave behind a meaningful legacy?' Ã"

Means retreated to the mountain home of his fifth (and current) wife, Pearl, in New Mexico, to meditate on the Ã'state of Indian affairsÃ" with four friends. And there he kept circling back to what his great-uncle -- Matthew King, or Noble Red Man to the Lakota -- had told him decades before: Ã'We must never forget that we were once a free people.Ã" Means began talking about taking Lakota country back to its roots as a free nation.

Ã'But what are we going to do about all the white people?Ã" one friend asked.

Ã'We'll figure it out,Ã" said Means.

On the third morning in Washington, Means was brooding and silent when we met. Ã'I've become convinced,Ã" he said finally, Ã'that what you're writing is a hatchet job. I'm so fed up with white people and their broken promises. When you go home and write your hatchet job, make sure you say how angry I am.Ã"

All militants are angry, of course, but Means'***s*** temper tantrums have been so baroque they seem fresh -- dazzling, even.

In 1974, as he was standing trial for the 1972 Custer courthouse riot, Means refused to stand up for the judge. Riot police swarmed the courtroom. A melee broke out, and, Means wrote: Ã'a cop came at me with a raised club. Rather than getting hit, I smashed his face mask and watched his nose twist and flatten against the plastic.Ã" The outburst put Means behind bars for a year.

Later, in 1991, Means'**s** rage crested. Amid the tumult of his fourth marriage, which saw his wife, Gloria Grant, file charges of spousal abuse, Means began to wonder Ã'if my life meant anything at all.Ã"

Ã'I began,Ã" he writes in his autobiography, Ã'to edge across the hazy line between reason and madness.Ã" He decided to become an assassin, and he composed a list of more than 100 people he wanted to kill. Ã'In one column were white people,Ã" he told me. Ã'In the other column, Indians. And you know what the difference was? The Indian list was longer. I wanted to rub out as many sellouts as I could. I was insane. I had a lot of anger, which I used to cover up my low self-esteem.Ã"

Means underwent therapy, but in 1997, while living on Navajo land, he got into a scuffle with his wife'**s** father. Leon Grant was in his 70s; he had a prosthetic arm. Navajo police alleged that Means battered him, but Means fought the charge vociferously, arguing that, under the terms of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, the Navajo had no right to prosecute an Indian who did not belong to their nation. Ultimately, even after Leon Grant withdrew his accusation, Means persisted with his sovereignty case against the Navajo Nation, taking it all the way to the Supreme Court, which two years ago refused to hear it.

In Washington, I wondered how Collette handled working with Means. He'd just spent two months living at Means'***s*** house, squeezed amid building supplies and crashing on the floor in a spare bedroom under remodeling. Ã'There are times when Russell can be a little insistent,Ã" he told me, choosing his words carefully. Ã'But I've done a lot of healing work around my issues with insistent people, and this experience is enabling me to do a little more healing.Ã"

Besides being a paralegal, Collette is a registered minister, training with the Heartland Aramaic Mission, based in Missouri, but he does not preach. Rather, he specializes in counseling spiritual seekers online. He is the mastermind behind an interactive self-help Web site, Innerpeace.org. He also promotes the use of rice hulls, an agricultural byproduct, as an eco-friendly building material.

Always inclined toward Libertarian views, Collette became an activist after watching the Berlin Wall fall in 1989. Suddenly, he felt that Ã'maybe individuals can make a difference.Ã" Since then, he has let Ã'guidanceÃ" dictate how he puts his talent to work for the cause. Ã'Basically,Ã" explained Collette, who'**s** spent much of the past 20 years moving about the ***United States***, Ã'I'm here until I'm guided to go be somewhere else.Ã"

Last Christmas Day, Collette found himself direly in need of guidance. He was camped in Washington, under the Ron Paul blimp in his Astro van, and he was at a crossroads in his life. Ã'I had three choices,Ã" he recalls. Ã'I could have gone south with the blimp. I could have stayed still, or I could have gone north to help Ron Paul in the New Hampshire primary.Ã"

That morning, another option presented itself: Collette read a short news piece about Lakotah'**s** declaration of independence. Ã'All these years ***I'd*** been living in the ***United States*** because I couldn't imagine any place having more freedom,Ã" he said. Ã'And now here was a country that actually had the potential to be freer.Ã"

Within two days, Collette was driving cross-country to start his new life in Lakotah.

At a deli on P Street NW, Means and Collette happened upon an Eritrean cabdriver named Woldeab Kelati, and Means told him of his quest for Lakota liberty.

Ã'This is not an easy thing,Ã" said Kelati, nibbling his sandwich.

Ã'Gaining freedom is never easy,Ã" said Means. Ã'Eritrea knows that.Ã"

Ã'But you don't have a boundary,Ã" said Kelati. Ã'You are in the center of the ***United States***.Ã"

Means explained the Lakota'***s*** treaty claims. Kelati shook his head. Ã'You have a difficult task,Ã" he pronounced. Ã'Good luck.Ã"

Means and Collette walked down Connecticut Avenue and came upon some petitioners for Greenpeace, two 20-ish women standing outside the Starbucks near Dupont Circle, crying, Ã'Save the whales!Ã" When they saw Means, one canvasser changed her tune, chanting, Ã'Help Mother Earth!Ã"

Means sidled toward them ***obligingly***. Ã'I can't sign,Ã" he said. Ã'I'm not a citizen of this country.Ã"

Ã'But we're international!Ã"

Means signed but refused to give money. Ã'You think indigenous people are a danger to the environment,Ã" he explained.

Ã'No, no, I think we're all on this Earth together!Ã"

Ã'You have tried to stop the traditional whale hunts of the Makah Indians in the Puget Sound of the Pacific Northwest,Ã" Means said. Ã'That is why I cannot become a member.Ã"

Ã'Okay! Thanks for talking to us!Ã"

Soon, Means and Collette took a cab to the Watergate, to visit the headquarters of the Libertarian Party. Means has high standing there. Executive director Shane Cory, 33, listened attentively to Means'***s*** pitch and said: Ã'What you've done is very bold. I'm afraid of bold action by our government. But I respect what you're doing. I'm Potawatomi.Ã"

The Potawatomi are an Indian nation with branches in Oklahoma and the upper Midwest, and, when Means heard the word, he all but leapt from his seat, delighted. Ã'You are?Ã" he exclaimed. Earlier, in a dark mood, he'd soliloquized on the truth of a slogan he'd seen once, on the butt of a gun owned by an indigenous freedom fighter in Nicaragua: Ã'Only Indians help Indians.Ã"

Cory is from Oklahoma, where the chairman of Citizen Potawatomi Nation, John Barrett, has spent the past three decades wildly growing the Potawatomi economy. Once headquartered in a beat-up trailer, with only $550 in assets, by 2006 the tribe had $350 million in assets. Ã'We have our own power grid,Ã" Cory said. Ã'We have the largest geothermally heated building in the state of Oklahoma. We have the largest tribal bank in the country, and I don't have to pay capital gains taxes.Ã"

These details were all news to Means, so Cory gave him a starter kit for launching an international bank. Ã'Have you talked to Bernard von NotHaus?Ã" he asked, referring to the father of the Liberty Dollar, a legal, alternative currency now circulating in the ***United States***. Ã'What about the Cato Institute?Ã"

It was the only time I saw anyone offer the Lakotans such detailed advice, and afterward, out in the hallway, Means shouted, Ã'Yes!Ã" Then he leapt toward Collette and hugged him.

Weeks passed. Collette, I learned, was arranging to mint two coins for a gold-and silver-based Lakotah currency system -- the dollar-like tonka and also another coin worth roughly two cents, the mato. Means was readying to make one more bid, this November, to become tribal chair on Pine Ridge. Ã'I'm going to run on the freedom ticket,Ã" he said, describing an ultra-Libertarian scheme. Ã'If I win, I will not have a job. I'll do nothing. But I think the ***U.S.*** government will see that we have a constituency, and they'll listen to us.Ã"

Means hadn't done a whit of campaigning, though, and he depicted the whole endeavor of wooing Pine Ridge voters as almost absurd. People are poor on the reservation, he told me. Ã'They don't have phones. And do you think I'm going to just walk around this whole goddamned reservation and get unanimous support?Ã"

I asked him if he'd done any follow-up on his Washington visit. Ã'No,Ã" he said flatly. Later, Bolivia would call to discuss a possible Washington visit between Means and Evo Morales. Beyond that, though, the whole journey down Embassy Row seemed almost like vanished history. Not a single other nation got back to Means on his petition.

To make matters worse, Means'**s** young nation was already riven with conflict. The tension focused on a Lakota activist named Duane Martin Sr., who'd come to Washington with Means in December for the declaration of independence.

Martin, 42, is heavyset, with thick, powerful forearms and long black hair drawn back in a ponytail. He is the leader of a sort of paramilitary force, the Strongheart Warrior Society, which, he said, responds to crime problems on or near Pine Ridge, Ã'day or night. It don't matter. Me and my 27 warriors, we're there because the tribal police, they do nothing. Nothing.Ã" In recent years, he'**s** joined Means in protesting the flow of alcohol onto Pine Ridge from liquor stores in neighboring Whiteclay, Neb., and also coordinated meetings on gang violence. He has appeared as a guest on a talk-radio show Means used to host on Pine Ridge and helped Means in his campaigns for tribal chair. He came to Washington with a longtime ally -- a white activist named Naomi Archer, who describes Martin in spiritual terms, as her Ã'brother.Ã"

Archer, who lives in North Carolina, is a male-to-female transsexual. She'd created the Republic of Lakotah'**s** Web site and was here to help the Lakota garner media coverage. But she and Means locked horns. Archer insisted that the Lakotans needed to pray before each meeting they held. Means wrote her off as a meddlesome white person -- and soon he stripped Archer'**s** ability to update the site. That act so angered Martin that he stopped working with Means and launched his own breakaway nation -- Lakota, it'**s** called, sans the Ã'h.Ã" Never mind that it is the same territory as Lakotah.

All this was on the table when Means and I were in Washington, and he discussed it calmly, saying: Ã'Duane'**s** a free person. He'**s** free to start his own country.Ã" But the situation was more tense than Means cared to get into. For soon a banner headline appeared on the Web site. Ã'Duane Martin, Sr.,Ã" it read, Ã'represents ONLY himself and is known for soliciting funds for himself. He is not affiliated with Republic of Lakotah.Ã"

This spring, Duane Martin met me by the roadside on the Pine Ridge reservation. It was cold outside, but he was wearing an immense pair of gray shorts and a droopy red T-shirt. His voice was a raspy, bellowing yell, and, as he sucked at the chewing tobacco lumped in his lower lip, he vowed to show me the Ã'real reservation. I'll let you see things that Russell Means don't even know about,Ã" he said.

We climbed into my rental car -- and then, when I buckled my seat belt, Martin erupted in protest. Ã'Leave that buckle alone!Ã" he said. Ã'Stop acting like a white man! All these constraints, all these rules. Be free, be free!Ã"

We drove, unbelted, and Martin complained that Means is a Ã'movie star. He doesn't know what life is like for everyday Indians.Ã"

The gripe may be rooted in jealousy. Means is a local celebrity, recognized wherever he goes on Pine Ridge. But, then again, Martin'**s** revolutionary propaganda is more populist than Means'**s**. The very name of his Web site -- lakotaoyate.net -- invokes an Indian word meaning Ã'people.Ã" As designed by Archer, it announces itself as Ã'a place for all the oyate -- Elders, mothers, fathers, and children.Ã"

Martin is already issuing Lakota ID cards, and he claims to have given out more than 150. He showed me his own. The front bore a menacing photo of Martin wearing dark sunglasses. On the back, it gave the cardholder a sense of omnipotence, bearing a disjointed list of privileges. It read, Ã'a. Diplomat; b. Passport; c. Driving; d. Hunting; e. Fishing; f. All of the Above.Ã"

As I wrote these words down, Martin cackled with glee, rejoicing over how his card gave Indians a free pass to ignore white society'**s** niggling rules.

Ã'See,Ã" he said. Ã'I'm not [expletive] around, am I?Ã"

We drove on, through a public housing community, Evergreen, in Means'**s** own town of Porcupine, ***S***.D. The 100 or so houses there, built in the '70s, were spattered with graffiti, their barren yards awash in old beer cans and vodka bottles -- all contraband on the dry reservation.

Ã'There are 13 bootleggers in here,Ã" Martin said, Ã'and seven dope dealers. And see all them kids there?Ã" He pointed to a pack of boys roughly 10 years old. Ã'That'**s** who they sell it to. Them'**s** the kids who are running around breaking windows. We asked Russell Means to come to a community meeting here, and he said, 'I've got no time for that.'?Ã" (Means denies saying this, and says that Martin never invited him to the meeting.)

Martin had spent months trying to organize Evergreen residents against the thugs in their midst. This afternoon, he was getting crime reports from locals. He stopped to chat with a woman named Rose Never Missed a Shot, and she complained of a neighbor who was selling vodka to her 17-year-old son. Ã'He got real drunk,Ã" she said. Ã'Then, the people who was selling him the alcohol, they beat my son up, broke his jaw. When they're drunk like that, I stay up all night.Ã"

We went into her small house to look at an X-ray of the fractured jaw. Sixteen family members lived inside. The interior walls were pocked with holes. The furnace did not work. The sole source of heat was the stove, and there was a bucket in the living room to catch the water that came in through the roof when it rained. A 19-year-old woman named Tammy Iron Shell was playing with her baby. I asked her if she supported Means'**s** claim of independence. Ã'Russell Means is just an old guy who'**s** been in a bunch of movies,Ã" she said. Ã'He'**s** never done nothing for us.Ã"

Ã'Tell him to put us on 'Oprah,' Ã" said her sister, Wendy Wallowing Bull. Ã'Tell him to put us on 'Extreme Makeover.' Ã"

Russell Means lives at a remove from the squalor afflicting most of Pine Ridge. He owns a large wood-frame house that sits on his own 140-acre horse ranch. The place was built, he says, in 1917 for the white BIA agent charged with overseeing Pine Ridge. But it'**s** more dilapidated than palatial. The paint is sun-worn, and there'**s** a wealth of construction material lying around amid a decade-long remodeling project.

Still, it is the headquarters of the Republic of Lakotah. I drove up the long driveway, past the sign warning of video surveillance.

When I arrived, Pearl Means was on the phone. She is a 48-year-old Navajo who works as a real estate broker. I heard her saying, Ã'Russ thinks it'**s** going to be a hatchet job.Ã"

Means himself was at the kitchen table, glowering. Though Pine Ridge is larger than Delaware, it functions more like a small town. Means had received detailed reports on my movements, and he did not like it that ***I'd*** tapped Duane Martin as a tour guide.

Tentatively, I noted that Means seemed to have some detractors.

Ã'There is no employment here,Ã" he thundered, Ã'and no businesses. There is nothing on this reservation. It'**s** like a prison. And what do you think people in prison start doing? They can't fight against the authorities oppressing them. The only way they can get out their frustration is by fighting each other. So yes, there'**s** division here, but look at your own [expletive] country.Ã"

When Means calmed down, he began discussing how, over a lifetime, a traditional Lakota accrues four names, the last coming when he is recognized as an elder. Ã'Your own people decide who you are,Ã" he said. Ã'My first name was Brave Eagle, and I tried to live up to it. I took dares; I wasn't afraid to fight. Then I was Ci--, which is a male bird out on the Plains, and I was a fancy dance champion. Then, in 1972, I became Works for the People. I tried to live up to that. But my fourth name? I'm still waiting for that, and I'm one of the oldest guys out here. I've outlived almost everybody, but my people haven't accepted me as an elder.Ã"

Eventually, Means wanted to show off one of his proudest achievements -- the Porcupine Health Clinic, which he helped start, with no help from the tribal government. We drove into the center of town and met with the clinic'**s** acting administrator, Floyd White Eyes. Means told him that he could help out over the summer by staffing the ambulance with Lakota supporters -- EMTs who'd phoned him from Denver. Ã'You'll have ambulance service for at least eight weeks,Ã" he said. Ã'I can promise you that.Ã"

Ã'That would be great, Russ,Ã" said White Eyes. Ã'That'd really help us out.Ã"

When we came out of the conference room, there were a few people sitting in the waiting area -- a young mother with her baby, an old man, an obese young woman in shorts and a dirty sweatshirt. Means began moving around the room. Without saying a word, he presumed to shake the hand of everyone present.

Was he planting campaign seeds, despite himself, or was he simply exercising a little noblesse oblige? It was unclear, but the moment seemed expertly scripted. It was as though the film had suddenly slowed and the sound had been cut, leaving only an essence: Here was a large man looming unvanquished above the oyate, playing the part of a stormy, unpredictable king. There was nothing warm or neighborly about what he was doing, but the performance dominated the room. Each person there received Means'**s** hand silently and solemnly. The old man rose to his feet, astonished, as though he was beholding a hurricane.

And then Russell Means said goodbye and walked away into the hills, up Crazy Horse Drive, toward home.

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WAYS and MEANS; OVER FOUR DECADES, Russell Means has led an insurrection, posed for Andy Warhol, aspired to be an assassin and been arguably the most influentia....

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