FREE LEONARD PELTIER

A film by Jesse Short Bull and David France

Running time: 110 minutes

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Logline

Half a century ago, the US government put Leonard Peltier in prison for murder. This year, he's now home – but not yet pardoned, and still innocent.

Long synopsis

In FREE LEONARD PELTIER, acclaimed directors Jesse Short Bull and David France revisit one of the most discredited convictions in modern America—the double life sentences handed down to Indian rights activist Leonard Peltier for the 1975 murder of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota. Using a mix of contemporary interviews, archival footage, and AI recreations, Short Bull and France bring alive the energy of the times, when the American Indian Movement (AIM) was rising up to protest centuries of injustice and oppression, and the US government was pushing back hard. The film chronicles occupations, arrests, demands, assassinations—and in the midst of it all, the story of Peltier, a one-time auto mechanic who joined the AIM movement to protect and advocate for his people and quickly found himself in a war. Short Bull and France situate Peltier's story in the broad sweep of history, from his forced time in an Indian boarding school to the legal harassment he endured as a young man to the intense siege he found himself in when the FBI descended on the Pine Ridge compound where he and others were staying. FREE LEONARD PELTIER vividly captures the climate of fear and apprehension that pervaded Pine Ridge at the time—and once Peltier is accused of murdering two FBI agents, it tracks the legal machinations and dirty pool tactics that saw him arrested, tried, convicted and imprisoned, all on the basis of evidence long since shown to be inconclusive at best and falsified at worst. On the fiftieth anniversary of the shootout on Pine Ridge, with Peltier still in prison, Short Bull's and France's documentary (a Native-led production, including co-director Short Bull, the production team, the lead cinematographer, the composer, the Impact Team, and even the PAs) arrives to revisit his case in a new era and to advocate for just what its title suggests: FREE LEONARD PELTIER. In a historic turn of events, as

one of his last acts as president, President Joseph Biden commuted Peltier's sentence, but even now the government refuses to pardon Peltier.

Short synopsis

In the early 1970s, the United States was roiled by protest: Vietnam, women's rights, gay rights, black power and, rising up at the forefront, the American Indian Movement, AIM. Leonard Peltier was a young mechanic when he joined AIM to advocate for his people and quickly found himself swept up in a war between activists and the US government. FREE LEONARD PELTIER, the new documentary from acclaimed directors Jesse Short Bull and David France, revisits the turbulent era of AIM, bringing alive the occupations, arrests, demands, and assassinations and culminating in the FBI's descent onto the compound on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where Peltier was staying. After two FBI agents are killed in the ensuing shootout, Peltier is arrested, tried, convicted of their murder and sentenced to two life terms in prison in one of the most notorious and discredited legal judgments in modern America. Fifty years later, with Peltier newly out of jail by way of an end-of-term commutation (but not pardon) from President Joseph Biden, Native-led production FREE LEONARD PELTIER arrives to revisit his case in a new era and to advocate for just what its title suggests.

Interview with Directors Jesse Short Bull and David France

How did you meet and decide to collaborate to create FREE LEONARD PELTIER?

Jesse Short Bull: I met David a little over a year ago at a screening in New York City of the first film I worked on, *Lakota Nation vs. United States*. We had a conversation then about working together for Leonard.

David France: Our producer, Jhane Myers, was a huge fan of Jesse's, so even before I met Jesse and saw his film, Jhane was suggesting that Jesse would be the ideal candidate to work on this project. Jesse is from South Dakota and lives right on the border of the Pine Ridge Reservation, so Leonard's story has been resonant for him his whole life. And it's been resonant for me since I was a teenager when these events took place fifty years ago.

What about your interview style enables you to do that, Jesse?

JSB: On my father's side, which is the Lakota side, I have relatives on both the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Indian reservations, and my mother's non-native. Growing up so close to the reservations, I picked up on how you can be effective by being soft, compassionate, quiet. If you can be genuine, you can speak to people in a very trusting way. It's not just about extracting information, it's about learning from the person.

I leaned on David to tackle some of the more controversial things. In Lakota culture sometimes it's a little taboo to pry. There are certain protocols. But on the other hand, we're trying to make medicine by telling this story,. so those protocols can be flexed.

David: When I started working on this project, a spiritual elder in Pine Ridge talked to me about how to get answers. He said, "Don't ask, don't pull, don't hold on to something and run with it. You won't get anything that way." So many people have gone into Pine Ridge to take away stories over so many generations that people there are leery of the process. The process had to be approached in a very gentle way and I learned so much watching Jesse do that.

Jesse, you said this film is trying to make medicine. What exactly is the medicine for? What is it attempting to cure?

JSB: People around Pine Ridge have all different sorts of medicine. Laughter is a medicine, even a compliment is a medicine. Everything Lakota storytellers did was for a purpose. A story was a tool—a tool to make you feel good, a tool to help you understand things, a tool to help you grieve, a tool to make your way in the confusion of our lives.

So we wanted to make a medicine, a tool, to help people understand why Leonard is in prison. Leonard is connected to so many bigger things. If we could find the most effective way to present his story, then we would hopefully have a tool, a medicine, for influence or change.

David: A lot of people have looked at this story. Decades ago, a pair of documentaries asked, “What happened?” Jesse suggested that we needed to ask, “Why did it happen?” No one has tried to examine Leonard’s story—which is recognized around the world as a story of injustice—to try to understand what drove that injustice.

How do you answer that question - Why did it happen?

JSB: After the Indian Wars, as the soldiers disappeared, we moved into a policy era. And we had a clash between people who were forced to assimilate and those who still maintained a lot of their own traditions and culture. We had a group of young people who recognized what was lost and wanted to try and save it and create a better quality of life. And we had a clash of how you view your surroundings: Is the earth something to pull resources from or is it something that you consider yourself a part of, not above?

All of these clashes met in Pine Ridge. In Lakota culture, one of the most sacred things is your family, so to have a war where you're fighting people you're related to, was a very dark time in our tribe's history. We don't ever want that to repeat. The boarding schools, the Bureau of Indian Affairs—which arguably has never been aligned with indigenous

nations—all of these institutions that our Indian people have to live with, they're not reflective of how we view the world.

David: It's an enormous story. It's Wagnerian. It could be a twenty-episode series. But we wanted a feature-length documentary out in 2025, which is the fiftieth anniversary of the shootout and Leonard's troubles.

Why it was important to you to make this film and get it out there?

JSB: When I try to be ambitious, things don't work. When I trust my spirit or creative intuition, I look for signs, and if the signs don't align, then I know I'm not on the right path.

David: My answer is much more earth-bound. In 1975, I was fourteen years old. I was from Michigan. And the story of the American Indian Movement animated a lot of the news. Russell Means and Dennis Banks were figures of resistance who taught me a lot about resisting, social justice, the excitement and dangers of taking on the establishment. It was a formative time for me, and I never forgot it. I went on to do political work around queer issues, always driven forward, I think, by the examples of AIM. Then I read an article last year that Leonard was still in prison, which surprised me because we hadn't heard about him for such a long time. And I thought, "My God, somebody's got to bring this story up to date." As we point out in the film, Leonard has not been allowed to speak publicly for thirty years.

Your film looks at the way that the legal system itself is a tool in the way that it puts forth story.

JSB: One of our interview subjects, the US attorney James Reynolds, mentioned that we all have a fundamental idea of what the law should be. We know it's not perfect, but it should try to get things right, and even if it doesn't, we always have the opportunity to get it right. But he said, "That's not the case." And this should really concern anybody living within the borders of the United States because it could affect them as well.

David: The shadow of the FBI is still deep and dark over Pine Ridge, and the memories are fresh about what the FBI was doing and what the FBI

has the potential to continue doing. People are very careful about how they say things and to whom they say them because that history is totally alive.

Even Reynolds himself says in the film that the FBI is holding a grudge. Why do you think that that grudge has lasted so long?

David: It's really hard to explain, isn't it? Three times this case went to the Supreme Court, and three times they decided not to hear the case. At the appellate level, the judge who upheld the conviction turned around within a small handful of years and said that he recognized that, by modern American standards of justice, a terrible injustice had taken place and that Leonard deserves a new trial.

JSB: The word “denial” keeps popping in my head. The FBI has to turn away from the truth, because it’s a hard road to turn and look at yourself. It's easier to believe the lie. \

Let’s talk about the nuts and bolts of the filmmaking. What were the challenges you faced?

JSB: In the early days of the edit, David was saying, “Try to make people be in the time. Use the archive footage as verité to put people back in the 1970s, to put people in Pine Ridge so that they can feel the fear, the despair, see it like Leonard would have seen it.” We really tried to put our audience into a spot where they could see things from Leonard's perspective.

Did you use any new technology in the film, and if so, how does that show up?

David: We are using AI in our recreations. We’re using AI for the shootout and the escape that day, and to illustrate an event that took place on the road while Leonard’s driving around in Marlon Brando's RV. We're also using some audio AI to stabilize the quality of the various interviews with Leonard.

The main thing I've always said about using AI is that it has to be done ethically, and that all new technology has good and bad uses. We are

inviting AI in this film to help keep our viewers in the 1970s, but we're being very careful to make sure that nobody is deceived and to make sure that the audience knows what we've done. Especially at the shootout, the facts are contested. We've aligned ourselves with the Archival Producers Association, which is setting guidelines for how AI can be used. Recreations have for decades been part of the language of documentary filmmaking, and we feel like we're not taking any shortcuts with the AI, we're just using a different approach.

Do you have a favorite moment in the film?

JSB: One is when Dino Butler—who was there on the day of the shootout and was one of the folks charged with the murder of the agents—is talking about how they escaped, and how thousands of bullets were being shot at him and none of the bullets hit him. It just got to me that this is *real*. This is so heavy. And it's scary.

Also, when Leonard's coming out of the courthouse in one of the shots, he cracks a big smile and you can see his spirit.

David: I have that feeling about Leonard when we meet him in prison painting, and the camera goes around to see what he's painting and he's painting himself, smiling. There's this remarkable indomitability that he has.

The country has changed a lot in the fifty years since Leonard was imprisoned. Do you want to say anything about the context into which this film is emerging?

JSB: When the protests were going down at Standing Rock, it dawned on me that law enforcement, the National Guard, they were just there to protect business. They' were there to protect capitalists. They were not there to protect the people who have a legal claim or who at one time owned the land. And that's where we have to watch out, I think, because if we keep doing that, we're going to have more carnage.

David: The movement across indigenous nations in the 1970s began raising our consciousness around the environment. So much of what

people fight for now was put on the agenda by the American Indian Movement, and it has never been more urgent. I think with this new administration, we're going to see real conflict between capitalism and humanity. Hopefully this film will give people a sense of courage about taking that on.

JSB: I am grateful to Leonard's and Dino's generation because as a mixed-blood of white and
Lakota heritage, choosing between embracing my culture and being a good American citizen, I don't have to bear as much scrutiny there as our parents did. I can pray and I can say, "I'm proud of my family name." I can embrace and love my culture, which they didn't really have the luxury of doing.

So in that sense, you think there has been change for the better?

JSB: Definitely. Despite the collateral damage, there has been a shift, and I'm happy to see that, especially when I see young people fluent in their language and understanding ceremonies and protocols—that fruit was not present in the 1970s when Leonard was young.

To bring the focus back to Leonard himself—there's Leonard as an individual, and Leonard as a cultural force. Can you reflect on his life and legacy?

JSB: People can see themselves in Leonard. They see their own struggles in him.

David: He's one of the last living leaders from that time. Russell, Dennis, so many of the other leaders are dead. The work that they did together advanced the agenda for Indian country out of this insane, dark past that was not that long ago, where people were kidnapped by the BIA and thrown into involuntary boarding schools and punished for speaking their language.
The work's not done, but I think the legacy of what was accomplished then is clear and undeniable, and I think Leonard's legacy will be one of a warrior.

Do you think the film will get Leonard out of prison at last?

JSB: I really pray that it leads to that. Leonard’s health is an issue. We want to get him out as soon as possible and we're up against the clock.

David: We've seen audiences react to documentaries in ways that are so powerful and muscular they can actually change people's imprisonment. If we have even a fraction of that response, it will lift Leonard’s story up again in ways that might have that kind of an impact.

Timeline of Key Events in the Leonard Peltier Story

900CE
Pictorial calendars begin recording Lakota history; they are believed to have first lived near the Great Lakes, later moving to the Great Plains.

1620
English settlers arrive at Plymouth Rock.

1776
The United States of America is founded.

1868
The Treaty of Fort Laramie is signed between the Unites States and the Lakota; its terms guarantee the Lakota exclusive use of the area they hold most sacred, the Black Hills.

1874
Gold is discovered in the Black Hills.

1877
The United States confiscates the Black Hills.

1889
South and North Dakota are admitted to the United States as its 39th and 40th states; the Black Hills are on land designated South Dakota.

1890
Lakota are massacred at Wounded Knee and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is created.

1941
The Mount Rushmore National Memorial is completed in the Black Hills.

1944
Leonard Peltier is born in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

1953
Leonard is taken to Wahpeton Indian School, a boarding school in North Dakota.

1958
Leonard moves to Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota to live with his father; he is jailed twice: for trying to siphon fuel from an Army truck and after being falsely accused of intoxication while watching the Sun Dance.

1959
Leonard moves first to Portland and then to Seattle to live with family.

1965
Leonard and his cousin Bob Robideau open an autobody shop in Seattle.

1969
Eighty-nine members of Indians of All Tribes occupy Alcatraz Island as a protest. They live on Alcatraz for nineteen months until they are forcibly removed by the US government.

1970
Twenty-three Native American activists occupy the top of Mount Rushmore, rename it Crazy Horse Mountain and retake it under the Treaty of Fort Laramie, beginning a new chapter in Native American activism. The occupation lasts two months.

1972
The American Indian Movement, AIM, opens a chapter on the Pine Ridge Reservation following the killing of Pine Ridge resident Yellow Thunder.

Leonard moves to Milwaukee and helps to organize the Milwaukee caravan for Trail of Broken Treaties, a cross-country caravan of American Indian and First Nations organizations that ends at the Department of Interior in Washington DC.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs grants Pine Ridge tribal president Dick Wilson $62,000 to establish a Tribal Ranger Group; this becomes known as the GOON squad.

1973
Leonard is jailed in Milwaukee for attempted murder after a fight with plain-clothed police officers; he is held for five months and released.

Approximately 200 Oglala Sioux and AIM members seize the town of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation to protest Dick Wilson's leadership. Agents from the FBI and the Bureau of Indian Affairs and US marshals surround the town. On his release from jail, Leonard helps AIM prepare supplies for occupiers. The occupation ends when two activists are killed. AIM leaders Dennis Banks and Russell Means are indicted; the case is dismissed for prosecutorial misconduct.

1974
The FBI issues a warrant for Leonard's arrest.

1975
Leonard attends an AIM convention in New Mexico and participates in brief occupations in Wisconsin and Arizona before heading to the Pine Ridge Reservation at the invitation of Pine Ridge elders. He lives on the Harry Jumping Bull compound.

FBI agents descend on the Harry Jumping Bull compound. A shootout ensues. AIM member Joe Stuntz is killed as are two FBI agents, Ronald Arthur Williams and Jack Ross Coler, who are shot at close range.

Four men on the Harry Jumping Bull compound are suspects in the murder of the FBI agents: Leonard Peltier, Bob Robideau, Dino Butler and Jimmy Eagle. All escape during a fire fight with US law enforcement.

Leonard flees to Canada.

The four suspects—Leonard, Robideau, Butler and Eagle—are indicted.

1976

Leonard is arrested in Alberta, Canada by Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Dino Butler and Bob Robideau are put on trial and acquitted by reason of self-defense. Charges against Jimmy Eagle are dropped.

Leonard is extradited from Canada to the United States on the basis of false testimony given by Myrtle Poor Bear.

1977
Leonard is put on trial. He is not allowed to argue self-defense. He is found guilty of two counts of murder in the first degree and sentenced to two consecutive terms of life in federal prison.

1978
Leonard stands trial on charges of attempted murder stemming from the incident in Milwaukee. He is acquitted.

The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals upholds Leonard's 1977 conviction for the murder of the FBI agents.

1979
The US Supreme court declines to review Leonard's appeal.

1980
Lawyers obtain 12,000 pages of declassified FBI documents.

1982
Writ of habeas corpus denied.

1985
Petition for a new trial denied.

1986
Conviction affirmed by the U.S. Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, despite acknowledgement of FBI misconduct.
1991
Petition for a new trial denied.

1993
Conviction again affirmed by the U.S. Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals.

1998
Leonard denied parole. Eligible again in 2008.

2001
President Clinton leaves office without granting Leonard a pardon, despite an
intense lobbying effort.

2004
The US Supreme Court again declines to hear Leonard's appeal.

2009
President Bush denies clemency petition.

Leonard denied parole. Eligible again in 2024.

2017
President Obama denies clemency petition.

Leonard has triple bypass heart surgery in Florida.

2021
US Attorney James H. Reynolds writes a letter about Leonard's case; states that Leonard didn't have a fair trial and was railroaded.

2024
Leonard denied parole.

2025
As one of his final acts in office, President Biden commutes Leonard's life sentence, allowing him to return home albeit under home confinement.

Official White House Statement (Jan. 20, 2025)

The President is commuting the life sentence imposed on Leonard Peltier so that he serves the remainder of his sentence in home confinement. He is now 80 years old, suffers from severe health ailments, and has spent the majority of his life (nearly half a century) in prison. This commutation will enable Mr. Peltier to spend his remaining days in home confinement but will not pardon him for his underlying crimes.

Mr. Peltier is a Native American activist who is currently serving life in prison for killing two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and escaping from federal prison. Tribal Nations, Nobel Peace laureates, former law enforcement officials (including the former U.S. Attorney whose office oversaw Mr. Peltier's prosecution and appeal), dozens of lawmakers, and human rights organizations strongly support granting Mr. Peltier clemency, citing his advanced age, illnesses, his close ties to and leadership in the Native American community, and the substantial length of time he has already spent in prison.

Statements from the FREE LEONARD PELTIER team

Co-director Jesse Short Bull:
We are beyond elated for Leonard and all of his supporters who advocated for this moment over the last 50 years. It is a powerful moment, and FREE LEONARD PELTIER has been our rallying cry in telling his story from the start.

Producer Jhane Myers:
It's a good day to be Native American! This is a prolific moment of justice in modern American history that has spanned 50 years, 7 presidents, advocates and multi generations of Native rights activists. Our film team is beyond grateful to document this journey to FREE LEONARD PELTIER. It's our duty to Native community and culture to tell an accurate story of the injustice. Thank you to President Biden for putting action behind your apology.