LIFE

‘FREE LEONARD PELTIER’ SPEAKS ON INDIGENOUS ACTIVIST’S JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

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Free Leonard Peltier” on Netflix, caption(s): “Chauncey Peltier, Leonard Peltier’s son, tabling Olympia Food Co-op. Chauncey would spread his father’s story to help free him.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @FREELEONARDPELTIER ON INSTAGRAM.

The documentary “Free Leonard Peltier” was released on Netflix on Indigenous Peoples’ Day, Monday, Oct. 12. It follows activist Leonard Peltier before and during his prison sentence.

The documentary was directed by David France and Jesse Short Bull. It includes several interviews with people who are passionate advocates of Peltier, people involved in his case and Peltier himself.

I really liked this documentary. All of the interviews were impactful and crucial to understanding Peltier’s story. The filmmakers are very deliberate in showing that Peltier is an advocate who cares deeply for his people.

Peltier was released from federal prison on Feb. 18, 2025 but faced a long road of obstacles before his final release.

Peltier spent his live advocating for Native American rights and wanted to make a better life for his people.

“If that’s a militant, then I guess I’m a militant,” he said in the documentary in response to criminal accusations from the government. Peltier said he was convicted because he was a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM).

The documentary provided background on the case and the events that happened afterwards.

Peltier was convicted of the murders of Ronald Williams and Jack Coler, two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents. The incident occurred on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota on June 26, 1975. Peltier admitted he was present during the incident but denied shooting the agents at point blank range, which was alleged by the prosecution of the trial.

The documentary also provided information about the Guardians of the Oglala Nation, or GOONS, a paramilitary vigilante or security force, which was created in the 1970s and was present on the reservation in South Dakota. The FBI was present on the reservation as well. They did not stop the GOONS from firebombing homes and shooting innocent Native Americans who lived on the reservation. The Native Americans went to a task force to tell them what happened, but no one listened. The people on the reservation were terrorized.

Peltier’s involvement in protecting people on the reservation was explained. He helped people whose cars had been emptied after the GOONS would stop them and throw out their medicine and he spent nights with families who had been shot at. Two FBI agents were also seen shooting at a house. They were heard saying “shoot the camp” and “we got one!” according to the documentary.

According to South Dakota Public Broadcasting, Williams and Coler were on the reservation to carry out an arrest warrant on Jimmy Eagle. The agents began following a red and white van they believed contained Eagle, but it was Peltier and two other AIM members.

A deputy fired at Peltier’s vehicle because he said he “heard gunshots.” Peltier was able to escape to Canada. When found, he was beaten and handcuffed. While the two FBI agents were shot, the other two men claimed self-defense. When they were found not guilty, the FBI viewed it as a slap in the face. Dino Butler, one of the two men found not guilty, said that the ancestors were helping him.

The documentary provided background information about the very different consequences Peltier faced. His girlfriend at the time testified against him and said that she was an eyewitness, but she was not there. She was forced to lie. Peltier said that “every motion the defense made, the judge protected.” The government claimed Peltier shot the FBI agents multiple times in the head when they were already on the ground. However, they had very little evidence to prove this.

According to the documentary, the FBI said that Peltier had an AR-15 which was found to have shot the soldiers, so they convicted him. However, the test about the AR-15 was faulty. Peltier’s fingerprints were not on the AR-15 that killed the soldiers, but this information was not shown in court. Motivation was high amongst the FBI to send Peltier to prison. The FBI taught people at the FBI academy that Peltier engaged in cold blooded murder.

“I’m guilty of standing up for my people’s rights. I’ve never killed anybody in my life,” Peltier said. Peltier said he was fighting a machine that had harmed more than just him.

The documentary explained that Amnesty International, amongst many other groups, called for a new trial. In 1948, the FBI agent who conducted the testing tried to justify it. The thought process was that because someone shot at the FBI agents, and Peltier was there; he was to blame. The government said that it didn’t matter.

All of Peltier’s appeals went to the Supreme Court and they refused to look at the case every single time.

“The prosecution changed, and flip flopped on who was the murderer,” William Kunstler, Peltier’s former attorney, said.

The documentary provided additional background on his case. In 1999, people began talking about clemency as a path to justice, but Peltier was committed to staying brave and claiming innocence. James H. Reynold was involved in the initial prosecution, but he later wrote a letter to the President Joe Biden changing his stance on the case.

The documentary also discussed the involvement of various presidents in Peltier’s case. Bill Clinton said that if Peltier admits his guilt, he would pardon him. On the last night of Biden’s presidency, Biden granted Peltier clemency.

The documentary opens and closes with Native American music, including when Peltier is finally freed. He also delivers a speech.

“They treated me like shit,” Peltier said regarding the conditions of the prison. “It was total darkness.”

The film ends on a more lighthearted note when Peltier tells a friend that “your job is to tell all women my age that I am available.”

Rating 4.5/5



Leonard Peltier inside federal prison in Florida in January 1993. Peltier was convicted in 1977 for a shoot out at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @FREELEONARDDOCU ON INSTAGRAM.