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Description
A debate rages around Leonard Peltier, an American Indian convicted of killing two FBI agents on an Indian reservation in the 1970s. Supporters say he's a martyr for Indian Rights, while critics disagree.

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Transcript

Leonard Peltier

PETER COYOTE, Actor and Author: He’s certainly a symbol. He’s certainly as much a symbol on this continent as Nelson Mandela is in Africa.

MARIA SHRIVER, reporting: And in Fargo, North Dakota, Assistant U.S. Attorney Lynn Crooks holds his opinion of Leonard Peltier as firmly today as he did ten years ago when he helped put him behind bars.

ASSISTANT U.S. ATTORNEY LYNN CROOKS: Mr. Peltier was basically a thug, that’s all he ever was, that’s all he’ll ever be, he’s basically a murdering thug.

SHRIVER: Martyr or Murderer? Political prisoner or criminal? That is the debate raging around Leonard Peltier. An Oglala Sioux Indian who is doing life, twice over, in Leavenworth Prison.

SHRIVER: Are you guilty of anything?

LEONARD PELTIER, Native American: I’m guilty of standing up for my people’s rights. I’m guilty of trying to stop the oppression that I have experienced and I’ve seen my people experience. Those are the things I’m guilty of.

SHRIVER: You didn’t say murder.

PELTIER: I never killed anybody. I never killed anybody in my life.

SHRIVER: But back in 1977 Peltier was convicted of killing two FBI agents. Jack Coler and Ron Williams had just been assigned to deal with the growing unrest on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. The area had been a hotbed of violence since the 1972 siege of Wounded Knee.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: Our crime is being Indian.

SHRIVER: A group of traditionalist Indians, calling themselves the "American Indian Movement" took up arms to protest the policies of a government supported and largely unpopular tribal council. In the ensuing years government agencies and Indians clashed, it was described as a time of virtual civil war. Why were you armed?

PELTIER: We were all armed, everybody was armed around there.

SHRIVER: Why?

PELTIER: Just the state of conditions that we were living under.

SHRIVER: Peltier says it was in 1975 against this backdrop, that the incident occurred involving Coler and Williams.
BRUCE ELLISON, attorney: The agents came down in this direction following in a vehicle.

SHRIVER: Attorney Bruce Ellison has been defending Leonard Peltier passionately for the past 12 years. ELLISON: Agents drove their cars up to this position and stopped, got out of their vehicles, Agent Coler get his sniper rifle and they began firing up towards the residences. SHRIVER: That scenario, says prosecutor Lynn Crooks, is just simply not true.

CROOKS: Mr. Peltier was the one they were following into this area. Mr. Peltier stopped his vehicle, got out of his vehicle, starting firing at these two agents and then it was basically a massacre. SHRIVER: The two factions agree on only one issue, after a six-hour shoot out, one Indian and two FBI agents were dead. The agents had been shot from a distance, finished off at close range.

CROOKS: Basically what they found is two guys lying face down beside Jack Coler’s bureau auto, the automobile looks like a sieve. Both of them had their-their faces shot off, they are not recognizable people anymore.

SHRIVER: Approximately 200 government agents arrived on the scene that day. Many within minutes, they surrounded the estimated 20 Indians. ELLISON: You can still see some twelve years later, some of the bullet holes from that day.

CROOKS: Once they found that those agents were dead, yeah the agents and FBI and law enforcement basically hosed the area down with lead, there are no questions about that. PELTIER: I participated in the shooting when I was bringing the women and children out of the house, and the bullets were flying around us. I did, yes.

CROOKS: He is responsible, he was there, he was firing, it was his objective, he’s the oldest guy, by his own claim he’s the leader. SHRIVER: All the Indians escaped and Peltier fled to Canada, along with three other Indians he was indicted for the murders of the agents. Two of the Indians were later acquitted in a trial, charges were later dropped against a third. But that left the FBI without a murderer, and according the Peltier, it also left him to take the rap.

CROOKS: The FBI obviously was out to convict somebody for shooting their two agents, that’s their job. And I would say that it’s fair to assume that they had a little more enthusiasm for the investigation than they would have been if it had been John Doe public.

SHRIVER: According to Crooks there is more than sufficient evidence to keep Peltier locked up. He was at the scene of the crime and a bullet casing found in the agent’s car matched the type of gun Peltier was firing. But many say Peltier was denied a fair trial, among them is Congressman Don Edwards, who said some evidence was suppressed that might have been favorable to Peltier.

DON EDWARDS, Congressman: In Leonard’s trial, the prosecution found out that there was serious doubt about some ballistic information as to whether or not it actually was Leonard’s rifle bullet that killed the agents. And it was very clear that this evidence should have been turned over to the defense and was not.

SHRIVER: Do you know who killed the two FBI agents? PELTIER: I can’t tell you, I can’t tell you because there’s a number of different reasons. SHRIVER: So you know but you can’t or you won't tell me who they are?
PELTIER: Yes.

SHRIVER: If a bullet from your rifle had killed one or both of those agents, would you have considered yourself a murderer?

PELTIER: No.

SHRIVER: Why not?

PELTIER: Because they were trying to kill us. In a state of war you don’t consider a soldier a murderer.

EDWARDS: We are not talking about whether or not Leonard was guilty or innocent. But the constitution, the laws of this country requires, guarantees that every individual in a trial, a criminal trial, shall be entitled to due process.

SHRIVER: Criminal or political prisoner? Whichever he is, Leonard Peltier will be in prison for life unless the work of his supporters will set him free.