

AG TAVERN TALK

CUSTER / LITTLE BIGHORN

FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

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By Jim Hessler

1. *What was America like in the 1870s in terms of western expansion and Indian policy?*

The United States following the Civil War was committed to expanding settlement and railroads westward into territories that the Native American tribes (Sioux and Cheyenne) considered to be their own and which had been promised by treaties with the United States government. The Grant Administration meanwhile supported a policy of confining Native Americans to designated reservations and abandonment of their “roving” lifestyles and warrior-driven cultures. Factors to consider:

- a) **Red Cloud’s War and the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie**: the treaty established the Great Sioux Reservation in present-day South Dakota, which included the Black Hills. The treaty’s 17 articles were complicated and contained many legal loopholes that are still argued today, being much more than the signing chiefs could have understood. The agreement also created an “unceded Indian territory” as a hunting reserve for those Indians who chose to follow and hunt the buffalo. White settlers could not occupy this area without tribal consent. This unceded territory extended west from the reservation to the Big Horn Mountains, and included the valleys surrounding the Powder, Tongue, Rosebud, and Big Horn rivers. This unceded territory became inhabited by hard-core Lakota and Cheyenne holdouts who resisted reservation life.
- b) **President Grant’s Indian Policy**: balanced political realities with military ones. Grant exhibited compassion for the Indians’ plight and considered the pursuit of racial extermination to be “abhorrent”. He supported confinement of the Native Americans to reservations and their abandoning of “roving life” as the solution. In the process, they would learn the English language, convert to Christianity, adapt to an agricultural lifestyle, and send their children to the white man’s school. In this regard, Grant’s views were like millions of Americans who regarded this as a benign but inevitable outcome and were frustrated by the red man’s refusal to submit.
- c) **Western Expansion and Railroads**: Grant had to increasingly weigh his sympathy for the Native American’s plight against the clamor for expansion. The Civil War was followed by a boom in railroad construction and the industry was the country’s largest non-agriculture employer. Some of the industry’s rapid growth was fueled by large amounts of speculative investment, much of which crashed in the economic panic of 1873. Beginning in the 1870s, the Northern Pacific Railroad pushed westward from Minnesota into Dakota Territory and

beyond. Railroads brought settlement, economic development, and millions of settlers into lands that the tribes considered their own.

- d) **Military Demobilization**: Following the Civil War, Congress did what it often does in peacetime. It reduced the effective size of the armed forces. Slightly more than one million men were still in the army's ranks in spring 1865. The demobilization of the massive volunteer army combined with Congress's vote of July 1866 to reduce the army to about 54,000 men. After a peak in 1867, the army's appropriated strength continued to be cut over the next decade such that the number was slightly over 25,000 by 1876.

2. *What leads up to the Great Sioux War of 1876?*

Tension, mistrust, and violence increased on both sides following railroad expansion and settlement into Sioux country. White encroachment, meanwhile, pushed the Lakota and Cheyenne westward onto the land of smaller tribes such as the Crow. (Much of the Great Sioux War occurred on land that the Sioux or Cheyenne had taken from other tribes.) The 1874 confirmation of gold in the Black Hills is often given as the official starting point. The Sioux considered the Black Hills to be sacred land and refused to sign the territory over to the United States.

In November 1875, President Grant, Generals Sheridan & Crook, and others met and agreed the army would stop evicting trespassers from the Black Hills Sioux reservation. They further instructed Indian agents in the region to notify all roaming Indians to return to their reservations by January 31, 1876, or face military action. This notification process was considered a joke, but it gave the government the perceived legal justification to turn the "Indian problem" over to the army.

Once the January 31 deadline passed, Lt. General Phil Sheridan, commanding of the Military Division of the Missouri including the Great Plains, urged for a winter campaign when the Indians would be immobile. In early February, Sheridan notified Generals George Crook (Department of the Platte) and Alfred Terry (Department of Dakota) to commence operations against the "hostiles".

Sheridan intended for three columns to generally converge upon Sioux country from three directions. (Note: this was NOT expected to be coordinated / concert of action due to the distances between columns, and each column was expected to be strong enough to defeat any opponents.)

General Alfred Terry's "Dakota Column" of about 1,000 cavalry and infantry included Custer's Seventh Cavalry. (All 12 companies of the regiment's 600+ men were together, but at roughly half the authorized strength.) The column marched from east to west through Dakota territory and into Montana. Due to delays, partially because Custer had to testify in impeachment proceedings in Washington, the Terry column did not get into the field until May.

General Crook's column, with about 1,100 cavalry / infantry / scouts, moved northward from Wyoming. They struck first on March 17 at battle of Powder River. Crook dispatched Colonel Joseph Reynolds with six cavalry companies, who attacked a village of about 65 lodges. Reynolds's troops initially took control of the village, but they soon retreated under enemy fire. The troops left several wounded soldiers on the

battlefield, which led to Colonel Reynolds' subsequent court-martial. Crook then withdrew from the field until late May.

Crook returned to the field, but on June 17, his force was attacked at battle of Rosebud and fought an aggressive warrior force to a stalemate. Crook withdrew from the field again and sat out for the next several weeks. This was unknown to Terry and Custer.

Colonel John Gibbon's small "Montana Column" of about 450 cavalry / infantry marched eastward down the Yellowstone River to prevent the hostiles from escaping northward. Gibbon has been criticized by pundits for inactivity, and while there is truth in that, his assignment was ridiculous to expect a small force to block the mobile Indians from crossing the vast Yellowstone River. Gibbon was also unable to maintain a surveillance on the size and location of Sitting Bull's growing camp.

The army proceeded into the campaign under two false assumptions. False reports from Indian agents led the army to expect approximately "only" 800 non-reservation "hostiles". The military leaders, based on experience, were convinced that the Indians would not stand up and fight, but would flee when their villages and families were threatened. Therefore, the pervading mentality was not to fight the warriors but to prevent them from scattering.

3. Tell us about the three principals: George Custer, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse.

a) **George Custer** was described by one contemporary as a "man of boundless confidence." Custer was an Ohio native and 1861 West Point graduate, where his "GOAT" standing at the bottom of his class was primarily attributed to disciplinary infractions. Custer first rose to prominence in the Civil War as a staff officer under George McClellan and Alfred Pleasonton. It was Pleasonton who promoted Custer to brigadier general of volunteers in June 1863 and Custer led a brigade through the Gettysburg campaign. Custer ended the Civil War highly regarded as a major general of volunteers and commander of a division. He also enjoyed the patronage of General Phil Sheridan from which he benefited for the remainder of his life. He was considered to be tireless, energetic, and ambitious like many officers. After the Civil War, Custer remained a public figure and served as lieutenant colonel in the Seventh Cavalry Regiment. Custer's signature victory on the Plains was his 1868 victory over Black Kettle's village on the Washita. Yet, he was active on the Plains throughout the 1870s, including an 1873 survey expedition in Yellowstone country and he led the 1874 expedition that confirmed gold in the Black Hills. Custer was 36 years old at the time of his death in 1876, and he remains a highly polarizing figure and leading symbol of the American West.

b) **Sitting Bull** was a Hunkpapa Lakota leader, born in the Dakota Territory or Yellowstone River country between 1831 – 1837, likely making him 40 years or older in 1876. As a young man in the late 1860s, he led war parties against U.S. forces in Red Cloud's War. Sitting Bull did not agree to the Fort Laramie treaty and did not sign agreements with the whites. Sitting Bull and his followers harassed migrants, forts, and railroad surveys into the 1870s while refusing to submit to reservation life. During the build-up to the Great Sioux War, Sitting Bull's band of followers was specifically targeted by Indian inspectors and Bureau of Indian Affairs as being "hostile" and in need of military action. As a "spiritual leader" in a decentralized society, Sitting Bull's 1876 camp continually expanded to likely more than 10,000 people as tribes joined together for safety in numbers. Sitting Bull reportedly had a vision of soldiers falling into

camp a week before the battle of Little Big Horn, ensuring the natives of powerful medicine in the upcoming battle.

c) **Crazy Horse** was an Oglala war chief, likely about 36 years old in 1876. Most of what we know about him comes from oral and family tradition. As a youth in the 1850s, he reportedly had a vision of a warrior with simple clothing, hair down with a single feather, and no face paint with a small brown stone behind his ear. Lightning struck the warrior in the vision, leaving a lightning symbol on his cheek, and white marks like hailstones on his body. The warrior told Curly that as long he dressed modestly, his tribesmen did not touch him, and he did not take scalps or war trophies, he would not be harmed in battle. Some have mischaracterized him as being “parallel” to Custer, but Crazy Horse was known to be aloof, shy, and modest which were unlike Custer. Through the late 1850s and early 1860s, Crazy Horse gained a reputation as a great warrior, and he was said to be in the Fetterman and Wagon Box fights. On June 17, 1876, Crazy Horse participated in the surprise attack against General Crook’s forces at the battle of the Rosebud and fought against Custer at Little Big Horn.

4. *Summarize the battle of Little Big Horn (June 25 – 26, 1876).*

By late June, 1876, all three of the military columns (Terry / Custer, Gibbon, and Crook) were in the field. Intelligence showed that Sitting Bull’s village was believed to be in Rosebud Creek country. Gibbon’s column united with Terry, who cut Custer and the Seventh Cavalry loose with orders to move south and west following the Indian trail along Rosebud Creek. Custer’s mobile column would strike the village from the south while Terry / Gibbon would approach from the north and block any flight in that direction. Note: there was no way to coordinate a specific date and time that the two columns would converge. [Terry’s Orders to Custer attached in appendix]

On the night of June 24, Custer’s scouts confirmed that the increasingly large native trail turned toward the Little Bighorn River valley. Terry’s orders to Custer had suggested that “should the village trail turns toward the Little Bighorn,” Custer was to proceed further south and prevent the Indians from passing around his flank. (Also to possibly give the slower Gibbon / Terry column time to arrive.) Custer had discretion to do what he thought best and instead followed the trail directly into the Little Bighorn valley. His job was to find the village and he had done that.

The Indian village on June 25 consisted of seven camp circles and an unknown number of inhabitants. Perhaps there were 1,500 – 2,500 warriors and maybe up to 10,000 inhabitants. This included Sitting Bull’s Hunkpapas and Crazy Horse’s Oglalas. The non-agency “hostiles” had joined with agency Indians who traditionally left during the summer to hunt and roam. These groups then banded together in increasing numbers for mutual defense. This was their country; they knew the terrain and were more mobile than the army.

Custer originally intended to surround the village overnight on June 25 and attack during the morning of June 26, a strategy that worked well at Washita in 1868. But his scouts feared discovery and helped convince him to launch a mid-day attack before any recon could be done on the village’s size and location.

Custer has been heavily criticized for subsequently dividing his command and moving to attack without proper recon – but, again, the prevailing fear was that the enemy would SCATTER and Custer would have been likely blamed if he allowed the village to escape.

In dividing his command, Custer maintained five companies and about 210 men under his immediate command.

Captain Fred Benteen, who hated Custer by all accounts, was dispatched with three companies on a reconnaissance to the regiment's left and temporarily moved out of the fight.

Major Marcus Reno with three companies and the scouts were subsequently ordered to attack the south end (Sitting Bull's end) of what was thought to be a fleeing village. Reno's attack quickly faltered as the warriors mounted a defense. Reno ordered a dismount, then retreated into nearby woods before fleeing to the bluffs on the other side of the river in a confused state with heavy losses.

Custer and his five companies had promised to support Reno. Custer's strategy is debated, but he supported Reno by proceeding northward on the bluffs overlooking the river. Presumably he intended to strike the village in flank and / or capture the noncombatants. Unfortunately, Reno's retreat freed up all the warriors to surround Custer and his five companies were wiped out to a man. Crazy Horse is considered to have played a leading role in the attack against Custer. Since no white man survived from Custer's battalion, the battle's greatest mysteries surround this "Custer's Last Stand" phase of the battle.

Benteen and his three companies meanwhile returned to the main trail but first came upon Reno's shattered command on the bluffs. Together with the regiment's slow-moving pack train of supplies and ammunition, they made a half-hearted effort to join Custer. Unable to reach Custer's doomed battalion, Reno & Benteen then hunkered down under siege through June 25 and 26 with seven combined companies, claiming to be unaware of Custer's fate.

The Terry / Gibbon column arrived on June 27. As they approached from the north, the village withdrew to the south and west. (A large village would not stay together for too long as there was generally not enough grass and game to sustain a large group of people and animals.)

Terry's men were the first to tell the Reno – Benteen survivors what had happened to Custer. Blame and recrimination started immediately within the army. Had Custer sacrificed his regiment in a vain pursuit of glory? Had Custer disobeyed Terry's orders or was the plan faulty to begin with? Had Custer acted responsibly, only to be betrayed by inept subordinates? The debates continue to this day, but these arguments often ignore the fact that the Seventh Cavalry was outfought by the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. The Native Americans defending their homes won the battle by defeating Reno and Custer in detail.

U.S. casualty estimates: 268 killed, 55 wounded (6 of whom later died.)

Native American loss estimates: unknown. Estimated between 30 – 100 killed, with perhaps 150-160 wounded and several non-combatants also killed.

5. *What occurred in the aftermath and why is this an important event?*

While the battle of Little Bighorn was not “the last great battle” that it is sometimes portrayed as, it can be considered the beginning of the end for Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and their followers.

Congress authorized the “emergency” expansion of the army by 2,500 men after Custer’s defeat. Both Terry and Crook remained immobile for several weeks while awaiting reinforcements. They finally returned to the field in August. There were additional battles in the fall. Crook hit a small village at Slim Buttes in September. Colonel Ranald Mackenzie and the Fourth Cavalry destroyed a Cheyenne village under Dull Knife and Little Wolf in November.

Nelson Miles and his Fifth Infantry also arrived in the fall and operated against the Indian bands throughout that winter. Miles’s continuous campaigning forced many of the Lakota and Cheyenne to surrender back to reservations or escape across the border into Canada.

In May 1877, Sitting Bull and his remaining followers escaped into Canada. Hunger forced him to return to the United States, and he surrendered in 1881. By the mid-1880s, Sitting Bull was touring with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show. Although his roaming days as a spiritual leader of the resistance were over, suspicion between him and Indian agents remained and he was shot during a botched arrest attempt in December 1890. The 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee occurred two weeks after Sitting Bull’s death and is often labeled as the end of the Sioux Wars.

Crazy Horse also surrendered in May 1877. He spent several months living the agency life, but other Lakota leaders were jealous of him and soon rumors began to spread that Crazy Horse was going to break out and resume his “hostile” life. He, too, was killed (bayoneted) during a botched arrest attempt in September 1877.

Ownership of the Black Hills had been a focal point of the 1876 war. Congress issued an ultimatum, the so-called “sell or starve” rider, cutting off rations to the Sioux until they ceased hostilities and ceded the Black Hills to the United States. In 1877, the Black Hills were formally taken away from the Sioux.

Rumors and allegations circulated within the army over the cause of the defeat. Some blamed Custer for allegedly violating Terry’s orders and rushing his regiment into battle. Others blamed Major Reno and Captain Benteen for failing Custer at the critical moment. Reno requested a Court of Inquiry, which was held in 1879 and exonerated Reno of any blame, although many considered it (and still consider it) to have been a whitewash to protect the honor of the army.

Elizabeth Bacon Custer, Custer’s widow, became a staunch public defender of her dead husband. She wrote and lectured extensively, promoting him as an ideal and gallant hero. Many refused to criticize Custer while “Libbie” was still alive. Some people believe that her work is the primary reason that his image survives as a public figure today, but I would dispute that notion.

Why should we care about Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Little Bighorn? Regardless of our feelings about the treatment of Native Americans afterwards, Custer and the superior officers who formulated Indian policy were heroes of the United States Army in the American Civil War. Our legacy of treating the Sioux, the Black Hills, and the other tribes is troubling, but Lieutenant Colonel Custer was not responsible for setting the country’s Indian policy. While the battle of Little Bighorn or “Custer’s Last Stand” can be considered “the beginning of the end” for Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, it stands as one of the great mythological moments in American Western culture. The cultural conflicts that led to it need to be remembered.

APPENDIX: General Terry's Orders to Custer

Headquarters of the Department of Dakota (In the Field)

Camp at Mouth of Rosebud River, Montana Territory June 22nd, 1876

Lieutenant-Colonel Custer,

Colonel: The Brigadier-General Commanding directs that, as soon as your regiment can be made ready for the march, you will proceed up the Rosebud in pursuit of the Indians whose trail was discovered by Major Reno a few days since. It is impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement, and were it not impossible to do so the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will, however, indicate to you his own views of what your action should be, and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see sufficient reason for departing from them. He thinks that you should proceed up the Rosebud until you ascertain definitely the direction in which the trail above spoken of leads. Should it be found (as it appears almost certain that it will be found) to turn towards the Little Bighorn, he thinks that you should still proceed southward, perhaps as far as the headwaters of the Tongue, and then turn toward the Little Horn, feeling constantly, however, to your left, so as to preclude the escape of the Indians passing around your left flank.

The column of Colonel Gibbon is now in motion for the mouth of the Big Horn. As soon as it reaches that point will cross the Yellowstone and move up at least as far as the forks of the Big and Little Horns. Of course its future movements must be controlled by circumstances as they arise, but it is hoped that the Indians, if upon the Little Horn, may be so nearly inclosed by the two columns that their escape will be impossible. The Department Commander desires that on your way up the Rosebud you should thoroughly examine the upper part of Tullock's Creek, and that you should endeavor to send a scout through to Colonel Gibbon's command.

The supply-steamer will be pushed up the Big Horn as far as the forks of the river is found to be navigable for that distance, and the Department Commander, who will accompany the column of Colonel Gibbon, desires you to report to him there not later than the expiration of the time for which your troops are rationed, unless in the mean time you receive further orders.

Very respectfully, Your obedient servant,

E. W. Smith, Captain, 18th Infantry A. A. J. G.

SUGGESTED READING

Evans, David C. *Custer's Last Fight: The Story of the Battle of The Little Big Horn*. El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 1999.

Fox, Richard. *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Graham, W.A., editor. *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1995. Reprint of the 1953 edition.

Gray, John S. *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. Reprint of the 1976 edition.

Liddic, Bruce. *Vanishing Victory: Custer's Final March*. El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2004.

Michno, Gregory F. *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*. Missoula, MT: Mountain Press, 1997.

Overfield, Loyd J., compiler. *The Little Big Horn, 1876: The Official Communications, Documents and Reports with Rosters of the Officers and Troops of the Campaign*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Reprint of the 1971 edition.

Utley, Robert M. *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Battle of the Little Bighorn Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Little_Bighorn

Custer's Luck: From Gettysburg to Little Bighorn

YouTube presentation by Jim Hessler (*Battle of Gettysburg Podcast* YouTube Channel)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xu-mnmr8ck&t=2339s>

Gettysburg Ties to the Battle of Little Bighorn

Addressing Gettysburg episode with Matt Callery and Jim Hessler (*Addressing Gettysburg* YouTube Channel)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFYk_hqGl8&t=93soes

Potential Follow-up Discussion Questions

1. What is our opinion of George Armstrong Custer today? Why? Do you think Custer's prominence as a historical figure of this period is justified or overrated?
2. How do we reconcile the treatment of Native Americans vs. the policies formed and enforced by many of our Civil War heroes?
3. Was the United States government justified in our western expansion vs. native tribes that were not "using" land in our traditional sense?
4. Discuss the differences in tactics / strategies of fighting Confederates vs. Native Americans.
5. Custer's victory over Black Kettle at Washita in 1868 is controversial. Was it a legitimate military victory or a "massacre" of a sleeping village? What lessons does Custer's prior experience provide for his last campaign?
6. Discuss the military strategies used in the 1876 campaign. Was Sheridan's plan to put three columns into the field realistic? Was Terry's plan to have Custer and Gibbon / Terry coordinate?
7. What motivated Custer during the 1876 campaign? Glory, promotion, or was he simply a soldier executing orders as he thought best?
8. Did Custer disobey his orders? Why or why not?
9. Discuss Custer's decision to attack at midday without a full recon of the village.
10. Discuss the performance of Major Reno – his attack in the valley, his subsequent retreat, and performance on the hill. Did he perform well, poorly, and was he drunk as some maintain? Did the Court of Inquiry properly exonerate him? Do you think there was a coverup?
11. Did Captain Benteen violate Custer's last order to "come on, be quick"?
12. Could the remaining seven companies of the regiment have saved Custer? Should they have tried harder?
13. Do you think there was a "Last Stand"? Does it matter?
14. Who bears responsibility for the defeat?
15. Why do we assign military blame for the defeat but never credit the warriors for a victory? What factors contributed to their victory? Do you buy into supernatural factor such as "medicine" and "omens" that exist in the literature of the battle?
16. What part does Libbie Custer play in keeping the legend alive?
17. Does Custer deserve his historical reputation as a great "loser"?
18. Why do we continue to remember and discuss this battle?