

**THE LAST STAND: CUSTER, SITTING BULL, AND THE  
BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN<sup>1</sup>**

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*Despite his inconsistencies and flaws, there was something about Custer that distinguished him from most other human beings . . . . He could inspire devotion and great love along with more than his share of hatred and disdain, and more than anything else, he wanted to be remembered.<sup>2</sup>*

I. Introduction

What really happened at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and why does General George Armstrong Custer still fascinate Americans over 100 years after his death? These questions, although certainly analyzed in *The Last Stand*, remain unanswered.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Nathaniel Philbrick's brilliant character sketches of Custer and the supporting cast of the military participants in the battle sheds light on how each character's personality and leadership style brought about Custer's last stand. Missing from the author's analysis is a complete and satisfying picture of Sitting Bull and other Indian fighters.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Philbrick skillfully and thoroughly examines Custer and selected superiors and subordinates, assessing their personal and professional strengths and flaws. What results is a superb and comprehensive review of the leadership capabilities of the officers in the Seventh Cavalry and how those capabilities (or inabilities) led to the engagement and its horrific conclusion. An officer in today's military would do well to apply these leadership lessons, especially when viewed through the lens of current

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<sup>1</sup> NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, *THE LAST STAND: CUSTER, SITTING BULL, AND THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 306.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 310 ("For legions of self-described Custer buffs, the Battle of the Little Bighorn is much like an unsolvable crossword puzzle: a conundrum that can sustain a lifetime of scrutiny and debate.").

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 325. Philbrick apologizes somewhat in his notes, pointing out that "[w]riting a balanced narrative involving two peoples with two widely different worldviews is an obvious challenge, especially when it comes to the nature of the evidence." *Id.*

military participation in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Leading soldiers is a timeless virtue and core trait which successful leaders embody and has not changed over time. Officers studying the devastating last stand thereby fulfill Custer's ultimate desire: "In defeat the hero of the Last Stand achieves the greatest of victories, since he will be remembered for all time."<sup>6</sup>

In response to the question why Philbrick, known for his award-winning novels "about the ocean and seafaring,"<sup>7</sup> departed from his usual books in working for four years on *The Last Stand*, Philbrick recalls his boyhood fascination with "Custer and the West."<sup>8</sup> Since 1876, beginning with Brigadier General Alfred Terry's debriefing missives to Washington, D.C.,<sup>9</sup> there have been thousands of publications analyzing Custer's actions. What Philbrick adds with *The Last Stand* to the body of "Custerology"<sup>10</sup> is not particularly historically revelatory,<sup>11</sup> but with his "pixel-rich, clear, and startling [narration],"<sup>12</sup> Philbrick expertly reveals the key leadership traits of the officers fighting in battle.

The maps Philbrick provides the reader follow his narrative perfectly and are particularly well-placed throughout the book. Decidedly one of the best comprehensive bibliographies in recent Custer fare makes this

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<sup>5</sup> Interview by Lieutenant Colonel Peter Kilner with Nat Philbrick, Author, in West Point, N.Y., <http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/books/the-last-stand/interview> (last visited Aug. 4, 2011) [hereinafter Philbrick Interview].

<sup>6</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Philbrick Interview, *supra* note 5. Conducting research at West Point, Philbrick spoke with "Lieutenant Colonel Peter Kilner . . . who responded to [his] questions about Custer and the Seventh Cavalry by alluding to what's happening today in Iraq and Afghanistan."

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* ("It was the movie 'Little Big Man' that really did it for me, and from the moment I saw that film as a high school freshman, I was hooked."). See also PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xvii (discussing his memories of Custer as "the deranged maniac of Little Big Man.").

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 284–85 (highlighting the dichotomy of Terry's "two dispatches: one for public distribution that made no attempt to find fault; the other, a more private communication to General Sheridan that blamed the catastrophe on Custer").

<sup>10</sup> MICHAEL A. ELLIOTT, CUSTEROLGY 2 (2007) (coining the phrase in reference to the "arena of historical interpretation and commemoration [of Custer]").

<sup>11</sup> Custer's actions have been analyzed ad nauseam, arguably more comprehensively than by Philbrick. See, e.g., JAMES DONOVAN, A TERRIBLE GLORY (2008); JAY MONAGHAN, CUSTER: THE LIFE OF GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER (1971); JEFFREY D. WERT, CUSTER: A CONTROVERSIAL LIFE OF GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Dyer, *Nathaniel Philbrick Moves Inland to Tell "The Last Stand,"* CLEVELAND.COM (May 9, 2010, 6:28 AM), [http://www.cleveland.com/books/index.ssf/2010/05/nathaniel\\_philbrick\\_moves\\_inla.html](http://www.cleveland.com/books/index.ssf/2010/05/nathaniel_philbrick_moves_inla.html) (last visited Aug. 4, 2011).

one of the most extensively researched battle analyses available.<sup>13</sup> Most readers will especially enjoy the footnotes section, written in narrative form, as Philbrick provides even more analysis in a discussion of his research and sources.<sup>14</sup> The most fascinating aspect of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, especially for those already generally familiar with the chronology of the historical blunder, is the leadership lessons Philbrick so skillfully brings to the forefront of the narrative by virtue of his talent for perfectly honed character sketches.

## II. Custer and His Supporting Cast

It is misleadingly easy to believe Custer's flaws and idiosyncrasies, which Philbrick packages so neatly, were apparent to all and surely predicted his awful demise. These same "flaws" are the basis for Custer's meteoric rise in the ranks of the military and his moniker, Boy General. Custer's celebrated status as the youngest officer to reach brevet major general<sup>15</sup> reveals his character as an ambitious officer and results-oriented leader whose passion for the battlefield rules his life.<sup>16</sup> Philbrick successfully maintains a neutral tone,<sup>17</sup> and even if there is some discussion of Custer's mistakes, he leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions about the picture he paints of Custer and his relationships with his fellow officers. Philbrick asks if "Custer's luck" merely runs out

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<sup>13</sup> Jerry D. Morelock, *The Last Stand: Book Review*, ARMCHAIR GENERAL (May 5, 2010), <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/the-last-stand-book-review.htm> [hereinafter Morelock Review] (praising maps and bibliography).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* Morelock is incensed at the structure of Philbrick's footnotes: "Much less helpful to readers was the egregiously awful decision . . . on how 'footnotes' would be presented. . . . This makes it exceedingly difficult . . . to match what Philbrick writes in the main text to the references that he cites to support it." *Id.* However, Philbrick's target audience is not the historical reader who checks citations, but is rather the reader interested in the masterful story-telling of the battle and the interpersonal relationships of the participants.

<sup>15</sup> Morelock Review, *supra* note 13 (discussing Custer's brevet promotion occurring only two years after graduating last in his class at West Point).

<sup>16</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xvi ("Custer had come to long for the battlefield. Only amid the smoke, blood, and confusion of war had his fidgety and ambitious mind found peace.").

<sup>17</sup> Custer is a polarizing figure, especially when it comes to assigning blame. *Compare* STEPHEN WEIR, HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS 91 (2008) (emphasizing Custer's hot-headedness and direct disobedience of General Terry's specific order to wait for reinforcements), *with* THE ARMY (Harold W. Nelson et al. eds., 2001) (espousing a less harsh view, referencing inadvertent mistakes: "Unaware of Crook's retreat, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer leads the 7th Cavalry against a large Indian village. Custer and five companies are wiped out.").

on June 25, 1876.<sup>18</sup> The better question is what leadership shortcomings and ill-informed decisions,<sup>19</sup> both Custer's<sup>20</sup> and the officers' around him that day, made that luck run out?

Luck is rarely, if ever, associated with great leadership. Characteristics required to lead are purposefully developed through training and over time, and often require a sagacity which Custer fundamentally lacked,<sup>21</sup> as "The main goal of leadership and discipline is to produce cohesion in units . . . . The best way to develop confidence in your innate fairness and good rationale for decisions is to seek and consider the input of your principal subordinates."<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Custer failed to instill this type of confidence in his unit members largely because of his contentious relationships with his immediate superior (General Terry) and his immediate subordinates (Major Reno and Captain Benteen).

#### A. Leadership of Custer's Subordinates: Major Reno and Captain Benteen

To put it mildly, neither Reno nor Benteen cared for Custer, and the dislike was mutual in both cases. Reno and Benteen's major complaint regarding Custer was his leadership style. Each recognized Custer to be a risk-taking, flamboyant leader and they respected neither Custer's position as their superior nor his impressive Civil War record. In Benteen's case, he attributed his friend's death to Custer's impetuosity: "He not only held a grudge against Custer for the death of Major Elliott at the Washita, he was galled by his low rank relative to what he'd achieved during the Civil War, especially when it required him to serve under inferior sorts like Custer and Reno." Benteen would take every opportunity to undermine Custer and did so at the Battle of the

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce Barcott, *Men on Horseback*, N.Y. TIMES, June 10, 2010 (Sunday Book Review), at BR1, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/books/review/Barcott-t.html> ("'Custer luck' propelled him up the ranks, and his risk-taking strategies secured an important victory over the Cheyenne in 1868.") (citations omitted).

<sup>19</sup> WEIR, *supra* note 17, at 91–92.

<sup>20</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 234 (getting too far ahead of the munitions), 259 (dividing his command to pursue the Indians), 272 (citing "Custer's hyperactive need to do too much").

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 18 (noting that "no one had done more to undermine Custer's career than Custer himself"). See also *id.* at 105 ("Custer had always lived life at a frenetic pace. He thrived on sensation.").

<sup>22</sup> KEITH E. BONN, ARMY OFFICER'S GUIDE 314–15 (48th ed. 1999).

Little Bighorn when he failed to comply with Custer's order to "Be Quick"<sup>23</sup> in joining Custer and his men as they launched their attack.

This disobedience to Custer's orders is significant in two ways. First, it shows the fundamental lack of respect Benteen had for Custer when he could not be bothered to hurry to his commander's aid after receiving an obviously hastily written missive delivered with great peril to the dispatched soldier. Second, it implies that Benteen fully expected Custer to succeed in his attack; Benteen did not care to play second fiddle to that glory-monger, Custer, whose luck had thus kept him alive despite his carelessness.<sup>24</sup>

Reno, on the other hand, completely lacked the ambition and zeal which Custer sought out and admired in his subordinates.<sup>25</sup> Philbrick discusses the death of Reno's beloved wife and his relationship with his eleven-year-old son to illustrate where Reno's heart and desires truly lay; the military and these Indian Wars kept him from his wife's funeral and were now keeping him from raising his child. Custer could not abide this lack of passion, to the point of excluding him from key planning meetings.<sup>26</sup> Instead of recognizing a weakness in a subordinate and developing Reno as an officer, Custer ostracizes Reno to the extent he can and undermines both Reno<sup>27</sup> and Benteen<sup>28</sup> whenever possible. Custer was too busy chasing his own glory and pursuing his own personal agenda to properly invest the time to develop Reno and Benteen.<sup>29</sup> Custer, aware of the divisive effect his personality and actions had, did nothing to attempt to modify his behavior for the greater good of

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<sup>23</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 181.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 137 (discussing Benteen's firm belief that "Custer's lust for glory . . . put the entire regiment at risk."). Further, following the battle but before news of the results had filtered in to the rest of the unit, Benteen believed that "[i]n his typically brash and impulsive way, Custer had attacked the village without proper preparation and forethought." *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 95 (explaining Custer's reaction to Reno failing to engage the Indians when presented with the opportunity during a scouting mission: "Custer was just as angry, but for an entirely different reason. Reno, the coward, had failed to attack!").

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 17 ("Even though he was the source of their latest and best information about the Indians, Marcus Reno was not invited to the meeting.").

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 97 ("Custer had recently rebuked Reno for not having the courage to follow the trail to its source even though Reno was in violation of Terry's orders.").

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 152 ("Almost as soon as the regiment crossed the divide, Custer was finding fault with Frederick Benteen . . . . Once again, [Benteen had] been banished.").

<sup>29</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 6-22 (formerly known as FM 27-100), ARMY LEADERSHIP para. 2-1 (12 Oct. 2006) [hereinafter FM 6-22] ("Army leaders are . . . charged with the responsibility of developing their subordinates.").

his unit and even actively aggravated contentious relationships with his subordinates.<sup>30</sup>

As a rule, a leader should unite rather than divide in order to achieve his cause and accomplish the mission because “An Army leader is anyone who by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility inspires and influences people to accomplish organizational goals. Army leaders motivate people . . . to pursue actions, focus thinking, and shape decisions for the greater good of the organization.”<sup>31</sup> Wrapped up in his own ambitions, Custer appears to have lost perspective as a military leader, but he was a poorer and less manageable subordinate to General Terry than Custer’s men were to him.

#### B. Leadership of Custer’s Superior: General Terry

General Terry was a crafty senior officer<sup>32</sup> who was mostly well liked,<sup>33</sup> evincing little ambition beyond his current rank and position and even less interest in doing any actual fighting in any wars. Philbrick presents an emotionally charged analysis of General Terry<sup>34</sup> when he argues, “Terry has slunk back into the shadows of history, letting Custer take center stage in a cumulative tragedy for which Terry was, perhaps more than any other single person, responsible.”<sup>35</sup> This is, notably, one of Philbrick’s few departures from the neutral tone he maintains throughout the narrative. But such criticism is too harsh: Terry’s only true leadership flaw is his inability to lead and inspire soldiers. Moreover, none of Terry’s actions were the decisive factor in the decimation of Custer’s men; for no Custer superior could have tempered that commander’s ill-fated, rash decisions during this engagement.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 115 (“If Custer had hoped to build the morale of his junior officers by casting aspersions on Benteen . . . and Reno . . . he had failed miserably.”).

<sup>31</sup> FM 6-22, *supra* note 29, para. 1-1.

<sup>32</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 100 (“Terry had a lawyer’s talent for crafting documents that appeared to say one thing but were couched in language that could allow for an entirely different interpretation should circumstances require it.”).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 17 (referring to Terry’s reputation for having a “congenial manner, but he was no fool.”).

<sup>34</sup> Morelock Review, *supra* note 13.

<sup>35</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 103.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 217 (“Custer was once again alone in the midst of excessive and exhilarating danger, attempting to extricate himself from a mess of his own devising. It was exactly where a deep and ungovernable part of him liked to be.”).

In fact, Terry attempted to use Custer's shortcomings to his advantage when he gave Custer carte blanche to attack if he could, but at the same time outlining in front of witnesses the written plan for Custer to work his way south around the village and wait for reinforcements.<sup>37</sup> The simple fact is this: General Terry did not realize the profound problems with his battle plan, nor the devastating effect Custer's poor relationships with Reno and Benteen would have, until it was too late.<sup>38</sup> But none of these leadership issues among the officers of the Seventh Cavalry are as devastating as the effect the battle would have on U.S. Indian policy in the political aftermath.

### C. National Leadership: Political Policy-Makers

An important point to bear in mind is that Custer led his troops to war on orders from the U.S. Government,<sup>39</sup> a fact which Philbrick drives home brilliantly in his discussion of Government-Indian relations and the fallout of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, particularly its effect on future Government policy with regard to the Indians.<sup>40</sup> Philbrick subtly prods the reader to conclude that "[t]he tragedy of both their lives is that they were not given the opportunity to explore those alternatives [to negotiate]."<sup>41</sup> It was the national agenda of expansion into the West that prevented any attempt to negotiate peace,<sup>42</sup> a negotiation which Sitting Bull would likely have welcomed in the moments leading up to the battle.<sup>43</sup>

### III. Sitting Bull Juxtaposed to and Compared with Custer

Philbrick's riveting account of the battle, pieced together largely with Seventh Cavalry members' accounts, and his expert analysis of

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<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 104.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 256.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 3 (explaining that "the Grant administration was in desperate need of a way to replenish a cash-starved economy" in the years leading up to the battle; discovery of gold in the Black Hills was the impetus).

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 309.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at xix.

<sup>42</sup> See generally MICHAEL HOWARD, *CLAUSEWITZ: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION* 36 (2002) (proposing that there are two types of wars—either "to destroy the enemy . . . or else to prescribe peace terms to him") (internal quotation marks omitted).

<sup>43</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 312 ("But at the Little Bighorn, he did not want to fight. He wanted to talk. This may be his most important legacy.").

Custer's character, serve only to underscore what Philbrick fails to deliver as promised: a parallel analysis of Sitting Bull. Philbrick maintains, "This is the story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but it is also the story of two Last Stands, for it is impossible to understand the one without the other."<sup>44</sup> Despite this assertion, the reader becomes enthralled from the start in the mythical General Custer. This is purposefully done, as Philbrick entrances the reader with his first lines of well-crafted prose, telling the story of Custer thrillingly hunting his first buffalo;<sup>45</sup> the author highlights Custer's unbridled, unabashed passion from those opening pages. Philbrick never fully attains that level of insight into Sitting Bull; the historical record is simply too lacking for as full and expertly drawn a picture of Sitting Bull as the reader enjoys in Custer's case.<sup>46</sup> The premise Philbrick attempts to disprove - "[w]hen it comes to the Little Bighorn, most Americans think of the Last Stand as belonging solely to [Custer]"<sup>47</sup> - is never expelled in favor of viewing it also as the "last stand" of the Indian Nation.

#### IV. Conclusion

Outstanding leadership hinges upon knowing one's subordinates, flaws and all. Terry knew Custer enough to develop a perfect written plan, while still allowing Custer to do what (Terry knew) Custer did best. This is exactly where Custer failed as a leader: he did not take into account the personalities and motivations of his two key subordinates; when he realized he needed their obedience to his orders to win the battle,<sup>48</sup> it was too late. "In Philbrick's view, both men were guilty of neglect of duty, inspired by personal animosity toward Custer."<sup>49</sup> However, every officer in a leadership position has encountered that difficult subordinate: the one who will disobey orders merely to

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<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at xvii-xviii. The premise Philbrick attempts to disprove that "[w]hen it comes to the Little Bighorn, most Americans think of the Last Stand as belonging solely to George Armstrong Custer" is never expelled in the book in favor of viewing it as the "last stand" of the Indian Nation. *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at xv-xvi.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 325 (explaining that "[w]hen it comes to our understanding of Sitting Bull, there is the underappreciated problem of evidence," referring to the oral tradition of storytelling of the Native American).

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at xvii.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 181 (noting that "[Custer] hated to admit it, but he needed Frederick Benteen.").

<sup>49</sup> Steve Raymond, *The Last Stand: an End for Custer, Sitting Bull, and a Way of Life*, SEATTLE TIMES, May 15, 2010, available at [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/books/2011850128\\_br16philbrick.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/books/2011850128_br16philbrick.html).



undermine the officer. As the U.S. military continues to engage in the fight against terrorism, officers simply must excel at leadership and interpersonal relationships (with both subordinates and superiors) to effectively command soldiers. It is that failing for which Custer should be remembered.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xviii (emphasizing Custer's most objectionable leadership quality: "By refusing to back down in the face of impossible odds, [Custer] project[s] an aura of righteous and charismatic determination. But when does resistance to the inevitable simply become an expression of personal ego or, even worse, of narrow-minded nostalgia for a vanished past?").