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Misguided by experience: a defense of Custer's actions at the Little Bighorn

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MISGUIDED BY EXPERIENCE:
A DEFENSE OF CUSTER'S ACTIONS AT THE LITTLE BIGHORN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for a degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

in

The Interdepartmental Program in Liberal Arts

by
Harold Douglas Baker, Jr.
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DEDICATION

To those military officers and men, past and present, who defy prudence and serve their country with dash, pomp, and bravado.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank both Dr. Stanley Hilton and Dr. Karl Roider for their unselfish commitment to expanding the academic horizons of this country's military officers: they are true patriots. Also, I thank my wife Amy and daughter Savannah for patiently suffering through another fall and winter without me, watching me write while I was at home and then wondering when I would next return from the deer woods.

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ABSTRACT

At midday on June 25, 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer split his Seventh Cavalry Regiment into three elements and attacked an enormous village of hostile Indians situated along the Little Bighorn River in modern-day Montana. Custer and his immediate command of five troops, a total of 225 men, did not survive the fight.

Immediately following the battle, officers—Reno, Benteen, Brisbin, Terry, Gibbon—began to recreate the history of the campaign's recent events in an effort to explain the disaster and clear themselves of responsibility. Their self-serving omission of facts and their convenient "remembrance" of things that had not happened fully blamed Custer for the calamity and heavily influenced future historical assessments of the battle.

Numerous explanations for the disaster have surfaced over the years. Driven by vain personal motives, Custer allegedly disobeyed General Terry's orders by taking a direct route to the Indian village and then rushing his exhausted men into battle without waiting for Gibbon's support. He did not conduct a thorough reconnaissance and ignored the warnings of his scouts. He violated a basic maxim of war by splitting his force in the face of the enemy, and his midday attack destroyed any hopes for surprise. Finally, Custer's actions displayed an overall ineptness at fighting Indians.

Some of the assessments hold truths, but they must be placed in the context of what Custer knew at the time and expected to encounter. In fact, given his prior experiences and information at hand, Custer correctly configured his forces and acted appropriately by attacking the hostile village. His forces, however, were not enough to overcome the combination of peculiar circumstances, some of his own creation, that opposed them.

INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the Battle of Gettysburg, the defeat of Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer's Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn has generated more written material than any other single fight involving American soldiers. This attraction does not come from the great number of casualties suffered by the regiment, for the battle was not the worst outing by the military in its wars against Native Americans, that ignominy falling to General Arthur St. Clair and the 832 men slain by the Shawnees and Miamis in 1791.¹ Little Bighorn's popularity lies in the controversy concerning what actually happened. Because there were no white eyewitnesses and Indian accounts were often contradictory, historians, soldiers, and the media have speculated about actual events over the years, their guesswork ranging from the fairly accurate to the ridiculous.

In large part, the attempt to solve the mysteries of Little Bighorn led to a demand to fix blame for the disaster on someone, and Custer emerged as the preferred candidate. General Alfred H. Terry and Custer's subordinate commanders, Major Marcus A. Reno and Captain Frederick W. Benteen, expecting an onslaught of accusations for their roles in the failed attack, campaigned to clear their names and, in the process, placed the blame on the one man who could not defend himself. The press, likewise, played a powerful role in shaping that version of events. "Custer," an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* read shortly after the battle, "preferred to make a reckless dash and take the consequences, in hope of making a personal victory and adding to the glory of another charge, rather than wait for a sufficiently powerful force to make the fight successful and share the glory with others."² Even Custer's superiors joined in the bashing. "I regard Custer's

¹ Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh*, p. 438.

² Quoted in Paul A. Hutton, "Custer's Changing Image," in *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, p. 467.

Massacre,” stated President Ulysses S. Grant in an interview with the *New York Herald*, “as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary—wholly unnecessary.”³ Not everyone blamed the officer for the disaster, but in light of his reputation, personality, political activity, and perceived aspirations, dominant opinion condemned the Boy General.

The indictments against Custer are numerous. Driven to regain the approval of President Grant, he allegedly disobeyed Terry’s orders, rushed up the Rosebud River, and arrived at the Indian village a day and a half before expected. He never conducted a full reconnaissance of the village and ignored the warnings of his scouts that there were too many Indians for the regiment to handle. With his men and horses fatigued from forced marches, he deliberately attacked a numerically superior enemy. He violated the principles of war by scorning surprise and by splintering his forces, losing the needed mass for a decisive victory. An egomaniac with limited experience fighting Indians, Custer deluded himself with invincibility and made irrational battlefield decisions, resulting in the destruction of his immediate command. That is the judgment of history—or at least of historians.

In truth, Custer did want a great victory for himself and his regiment, but he did not foolishly throw away his and his men’s lives. He did not disobey Terry’s orders, for they were nothing more than suggestions. Terry intended for Custer to find the Indians and attack them, and his orders left Custer the discretion to make the decision to attack or not. Custer, furthermore, did not attack earlier than planned because Terry had not specified a time for a combined attack with Colonel John Gibbon’s soldiers in support.

³ Quoted in Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend*, p. 44.

The much-debated link-up date of June 26 was only an approximation of when Terry and Gibbon's column would reach the mouth of the Little Bighorn and Terry's written orders to Custer did not even mention it.

Custer's scouts did report a large concentration of Indians situated on the lower Little Bighorn, and he was guilty of not conducting a thorough reconnaissance before his attack, but he had every intention to do so. His plan to view the objective and attack on the 26th changed, however, as he received reports on the morning of the 25th that hostiles had discovered the regiment. Fearing that the enemy would scatter, Custer pushed his men forward in pursuit. Custer did not know the true size or exact location of the Indian camp nor was he truly concerned. He shared a belief with most Army officers on the Plains, founded in previous experiences, that the hardest part of fighting Indians was not defeating them, but catching them. Hence, his approach toward the village was a forced reconnaissance, a difficult mission requiring situational development, decisions, and coordination while on the move.

Custer's planned three-pronged attack, with the bulk of his combat strength directly under his own control, would allow him to hit the village from multiple directions and prevent a mass enemy escape. This scheme of maneuver had worked eight years earlier on the Washita River against a village of Southern Cheyennes, Kiowas, Apaches, Arapahos, and Comanches that we now know was at least as large as the encampment on the Little Bighorn.

The driving component of Custer's attack was his belief that he had lost the element of surprise, which would seem a direct violation of one of the basic principles of war. However, he did not believe he was attacking a village in a defensive posture, but one on the run. Ironically, he did achieve surprise as all Indian accounts indicate that

they were not expecting an attack, and the appearance of Reno's battalion caught many of the Indians in the midst of their daily activities. Likewise, Indian accounts dispel theories that they intricately planned an attack against Custer.

Given what he knew at the time and what he had experienced in prior engagements, Custer's actions and tactics were sound, and he does not deserve the sole blame for the disaster. His attack under normal circumstances likely would have worked, but the situation on the Little Bighorn was anything but normal. On that day in 1876, the Sioux and Cheyenne were strong in numbers, confident after repelling General George Crook's June 17 attack along the Rosebud, well-armed, motivated by the government's actions to take the Black Hills, and led by extraordinary chiefs. They were not going to run as they had so often done before, and here lay Custer's misjudgment and demise. His tactics, which had proven successful before, represented a blatant underestimation of the Indians' resolve and fighting ability, something of which not only Custer but the majority of Army officers on the Plains were guilty.

For Custer, prior experience and lessons learned did not provide a basis for Seventh Cavalry victory but, instead, set the stage for disaster.

CHAPTER 1

PRELIMINARIES OF WAR

In the decade prior to the Great Sioux War of 1876-77, the Indian policy of the United States vacillated between peaceful pacification and overt hostility. The Army was caught in the middle, criticized by the Eastern peace zealots when its forces destroyed a hostile Indian village and denounced by Western settlers when its leaders tried less forceful means to establish peace. The events of this period reflected the government's indecisiveness about how best to protect the frontier population while humanely addressing Indian issues. These mixed agendas eventually resulted in the large-scale gathering of the determined, angry, and well-armed Indian force that Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer encountered on the Little Bighorn. Custer, for his part, in the years preceding the fateful clash in June 1876, developed and honed the opinions, perceptions, tactics, and decision-making skills that prompted and justified his actions at the Little Bighorn.

When the Civil War ended, the United States revived its focus on continental expansion, reducing the gap between the eastern states and western territories by conquering the Great Plains. In the spring of 1866, the progress of the Kansas Pacific, Union Pacific, and Central Pacific railroads signaled the new era of westward settlement. The Army's mission in the unfolding story of Manifest Destiny was to protect the railroad builders from marauding Indians, but not to carry out a full campaign against the Plains tribes.¹ The government, controlled by the Radical Republicans, had chosen a more humanitarian approach to solving the Indian question: the Peace Policy. This

¹ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian*, pp. 2-3.

strategy established negotiating commissions that offered monetary annuities and designated reservations in return for the safe construction of railroads and forts and passage through the Indians' territories. The ultimate goal of the Peace Policy was the assimilation of the Indians into white society. Once the Indians were on the reservations, agents would provide instruction in farming and animal husbandry and, through schooling and religious teachings, turn the Indians into peaceful, law-abiding citizens.²

The Peace Policy worked to an extent, but the Teton Sioux, consisting of the Hunkpapa, Brulé, Oglalla, Two Kettle, Miniconjou, San Arcs, and Blackfeet bands, and their allies the Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho did not accept the offerings.³ Residing in an area commonly referred to as the Powder River country, a vast domain ranging from the Missouri River in the east to the Bighorn Mountains in the west and from Platte River in the south to the Canadian border in the north, these tribes did not stand in the way of any current railroad expansion nor were they disrupting the travel of white miners along the Bozeman Trail, which ran through their territory and into Montana.⁴ Army leaders, however, saw these hostiles as an inevitable threat to westward expansion and were convinced that eventually they would have to use force to subdue them.

In the spring of 1866, the Army had more than half of its 55,000 soldiers stationed in the former Confederate states and was not fully prepared for a conflict with the Sioux.⁵ Recognizing this, General William Tecumseh Sherman, the commander of the Department of the Mississippi, a territory that encompassed the Plains, adopted a plan to

² George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians*, pp. 134-35.

³ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, pp. 8-9.

⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors*, p. 227.

⁵ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 12.

first acquire the Sioux's consent for white usage of the Bozeman Trail and then to build a series of forts along the travel route. With the forts in position, he could reorganize the Army, raise and train new cavalry regiments, and attack the Sioux the next year.

Negotiations for the trail went well as a number of friendly Indians agreed to allow the whites free passage in return for yearly annuities, but Sherman's negotiators purposely neglected to mention the building of forts. When the Oglalla chiefs Red Cloud and Crazy Horse discovered the Army's true intentions, they took to the warpath, throwing the yet prepared military into a fight dubbed Red Cloud's War.⁶

The significant relationship between Red Cloud's War and the Great Sioux War of the following decade is the agreement that ended the first contest—the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. The Army poorly managed this conflict and suffered staggering defeats at times. In the midst of the fighting, moreover, problems sprang up on the Central Plains where raiding bands of Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa interrupted the construction of the Kansas Pacific railroad. With a primary mission of protecting the railroad builders, the Army could not continue to waste money or lives in a losing effort against the Sioux while other hostiles ravaged the Kansas countryside. Realizing that the frontier Army was too small and too poorly-equipped to wage a full-scale war on multiple fronts, Sherman opted to target one group of Indians at a time. To do this, he reverted to the Peace Policy and managed to appease the Sioux, bringing the conflict to an end for the time being. The Army would have to abandon its forts on the Bozeman Trail, but Sherman would now have the much-needed manpower to quell the problem on the Central Plains.⁷

⁶ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, pp. 228-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

In April 1868, Red Cloud and representatives from the other Teton Sioux bands negotiated the Fort Laramie Treaty, giving them present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River as the Great Sioux Reservation and hunting rights to portions of the Powder River country and its massive buffalo herd. To control the reservation, the government established two agencies in northwest Nebraska, the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, the latter named for a dominant Brulé chief. At the time of the treaty, the total population of Sioux in the Powder River area numbered between 10,000 and 15,000. Of these at least 5,000 immediately migrated to the agencies and within three years another 5,000 took up reservation life, leaving an estimated contingent of 3,000 wild Sioux outside the reservation boundaries.⁸ This latter group never signed the treaty nor chose to abide by its regulations.

The treaty appeared to be an all-out victory for the Sioux and their allies; however, several of its articles soon created friction between the Indians and the United States. First, the agreement took on a false appearance of permanence because neither side could make changes to the treaty “unless executed and signed by three-fourths of all the adult male Indians”—a nearly impossible stipulation to achieve. Secondly, the Sioux’s designated hunting area, a stretch of land lying south of the Yellowstone River but encompassing the eastern flank of the Bighorn Mountains and the rivers named after them, was simply just that. The government dubbed it “unceded,” meaning that the Sioux and their allies could hunt there as long as the buffalo existed but could not “occupy permanently the territory outside the reservation.” Lastly, while the Army agreed to abandon its forts, close the Bozeman Trail, and keep whites from entering or

⁸ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, p. 253.

settling inside the reservation, the government gained authorization to construct railroads through and around the reservation for a cost of “whatever amount of damage may be assessed by three disinterested commissioners.”⁹ Purposeful violations of these clauses eventually led to the outbreak of war.

The fight on the Central Plains went well for the Army and there Custer experienced his first major contact with Indians at the Battle of the Washita in November 1868. From this single fight emerged the preferred tactic for attacking Indian villages: a coordinated cavalry charge from multiple directions executed at dawn against an unsuspecting enemy. Other officers, such as Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie in his battle against the Kiowa and Cheyenne in Palo Duro Canyon in September 1874, would later emulate the actions of the Seventh Cavalry’s commander with great success.¹⁰ Although the battle boosted the reputation of Custer and his regiment, it also influenced the disaster at the Little Bighorn.

Meanwhile, the Indians who had not signed the Fort Laramie Treaty, some 3,000 Sioux and 400 Northern Cheyenne, remained in the Powder River country, the “unceded territory.” The various bands followed their own leaders, among them Two Moon, Four Horns, Gall, Crow King, Lame Deer, Black Eagle, and Crazy Horse. But, one chief dominated the others: the Hunkpapa leader Sitting Bull. Among Indians and whites alike, the occupants of the “unceded territory” became known as “Sitting Bull’s people.”¹¹

⁹ “Treaty of Fort Laramie with the Sioux, April 29, 1868,” p. 5.

¹⁰ Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 215.

¹¹ Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*, p. 113.

These nontreaty Indians roamed at will throughout the region, but they often frequented the agencies to visit relatives in the fall and winter, attaching themselves to the reservation long enough to draw rations. That procedure often gave Indian agents and the government the impression that the Peace Policy was working, yet as soon as the weather turned, the nontreaties left for the Powder River, often joined by others disgruntled with reservation life. In addition to that summer migration, agents also witnessed a great exodus of treaty Indians as they routinely joined their kinsmen in the wilds of Montana and Wyoming for hunting and celebrating, returning in the latter portion of the season. The number of Indians in the “unceded territory,” thus, rose in the summer and decreased in the winter, yet there always remained a contingent of hostile Sioux in the Powder River country, a direct violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty.¹²

Since they had not signed the treaty, Sitting Bull’s bands did not confine themselves to the designated hunting area, often residing outside of it and in the Yellowstone Basin, and they saw no need to respect the railroads. In 1871 and 1872, as the first surveyors for the Northern Pacific railroad and their soldier escorts moved along the Yellowstone, they repeatedly encountered hostile Sioux war parties, which forced them to abandon their work. Responsibility for the safe construction of the Northern Pacific lay with the Army’s Department of Dakota, yet the command did not have enough cavalry to deal forcefully with the Indian resistance. To counter this manpower shortage, General Philip H. Sheridan, now in overall command of the region, assigned Custer and his Seventh Cavalry Regiment to the department in the summer of 1873 to protect the railroad survey west of the Missouri River and into Montana.¹³

¹² Hyde, *Red Cloud’s Folk*, pp. 252-53.

¹³ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 115.

On June 20, 1873, the Yellowstone Expedition, commanded by Colonel David S. Stanley and accompanied by Custer and over 1,500 men, departed from Fort Rice, Dakota Territory. In August, while moving along the Yellowstone Valley, Custer and his troops fought the hostiles in a number of skirmishes. That September, upon completion of the survey mission, the expedition disbanded.¹⁴ Custer and his men had performed brilliantly against the Sioux and Cheyenne, yet they were unable to defeat them decisively. Sitting Bull's village, numbering over 800 fighting men, had fled after putting up a short, intense fight. Custer, in his official report, confidently noted that, as his troopers advanced to charge, the Indians had "exhibited unmistakable signs of commotion, and their resistance became more feeble, until finally satisfied of the earnest of our attack they turned their ponies' heads and began disorderly flight." Custer's element pursued the warriors for nine miles but never caught them.¹⁵

By autumn of that year, hostile activity had increased in the Northern Plains. Large numbers of Sitting Bull's bands arrived at the agencies in autumn, just after the fight with Custer, complaining of the presence of surveyors and troops in their hunting grounds. Their complaints stirred the reservation Sioux, creating potential trouble for the white settlements in Nebraska and Wyoming. Later, in February 1874, a member of the band murdered an agency clerk, and others killed two soldiers outside Fort Laramie. Throughout the next two months, hostilities escalated as war parties repeatedly struck isolated ranches, killing settlers and running off livestock.¹⁶ General Sheridan sent troops to reinforce the agencies, but he insisted that the Army needed a more strategically

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 117-23.

¹⁵ Custer's battle report, in Elizabeth B. Custer, *"Boots and Saddles" or, Life in Dakota with General Custer*, p. 246.

¹⁶ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, pp. 207-14.

located post to discourage the violence. “By holding an interior point in the heart of the Indian country,” he wrote to Sherman, “we could threaten the villages and the stock of the Indians, if they made raids on our settlements.”¹⁷

For the site, Sheridan chose the Black Hills, a land held sacred by the Sioux, but he needed reconnaissance information before reaching a final decision. Receiving approval from President Ulysses S. Grant and General Sherman, he assigned Custer and his regiment the task of exploring the region. Although Sheridan initially wanted to send a force from Fort Laramie, which lay only 100 miles southwest of the Black Hills, he concluded that Custer’s route from Fort Lincoln, although three times as far, would less likely disturb the Indians on the Sioux reservation.¹⁸ The official objective of the ensuing Black Hills Expedition was to find a location to build a fort. Debate immediately surfaced in the government over the placement of the fort, the movement of troops without Indian consent, and the legality of the whole undertaking. The Treaty of 1868, however, allowed for the construction of new facilities if they would help government officials in the conduct of their duties.¹⁹ But that was not the problem.

The real problem, in any case, stemmed from the unofficial reason for the expedition: gold. Since the time that trapper and explorer Jim Bridger had reported finding gold in the Black Hills in 1859, a rumor of the area’s vast mineral deposits had circulated throughout the country. By the early 1870s, the talk had turned to reality as on more than one occasion Indians brought in nuggets or grains of gold for trading, and then, under the influence of whiskey, revealed the location of their findings.²⁰ Public demand

¹⁷Quoted in Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 133.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁹Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, p. 375.

²⁰Frazier and Robert Hunt, *I Fought with Custer: The Story of Sergeant Windolph*, p. 117.

for an open exploration of the mountains grew even greater as the country reeled under the impact of the Panic of 1873. The *Bismarck Tribune* voiced general sentiment. “As the Christian looks forward with hope and faith to that land of pure delight,” it declared, “so the miner looks forward to the Black Hills, a region of fabulous wealth, where the hills repose on beds of gold and the rocks are studded with precious metals.”²¹ The government, unable to explain the reasons for the depression, could not ignore public opinion, so it undertook to check the validity of the claims. If great deposits of gold were present in the region, the government might be able to purchase the land from the Sioux and, with minimal effort, end the economic slump.²²

Amid vast publicity, on July 2, 1874, the Black Hills Expedition under Custer marched out of Fort Lincoln with ten cavalry troops, two infantry companies, three Gatling guns, and a three-inch Rodman cannon. Also along were engineers, three journalists, botanists, topographers, and other specialists to map the country and find a suitable spot for the fort. As part of the unofficial reason for the expedition, a two-man geological team accompanied them. “In view of the clamor about gold in the Black Hills,” wrote historian Robert Utley, “no military expedition could have entered the hills for any purpose without also looking for gold.”²³

The expedition expected to have to fight its way into the Black Hills and was prepared to do so. After one sighting of hostiles just before entering the Black Hills, however, there were no further immediate signs of Indians. By the end of the month, Custer’s small army had reached its destination, and while camped near French Creek,

²¹ Quoted in Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 134.

²² Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, pp. 372-73.

²³ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 135.

the prospectors unearthed the long-sought ore. “We have discovered gold without a doubt,” he wrote to his wife Libbie on August 2, “and probably other valuable metals.”²⁴ Custer also sent his first official report with one of his white scouts, Lonesome Charley Reynolds, to Fort Laramie to inform the outside world of the findings. In the report, Custer wrote that he had in front of him “forty or fifty small particles of pure gold, in size averaging that of a small pin-head and most of it obtained today from one pan-full of earth.” In a widely circulated passage, he penned that the inexperienced miners had “found gold among the roots of the grass.”²⁵ He went on, in further accounts, to stress the beauty of the area, its fertile grasses, abundance of game, and the scarcity of Indians.²⁶ As the expedition departed the Black Hills on August 14, Custer’s penmanship had promoted the opening of the area as much as the actual discovery of gold, and he would share a responsibility for the coming war.

Word of the territory’s potential drove the public to a frenzy, and, although the Interior Department proclaimed the Black Hills closed to whites because of the Treaty of 1868 and both President Grant and General Sherman issued directives for the Army to halt trespassers, miners still rushed into the area. Prompted by the outcry for a complete opening of the Black Hills, another expedition, headed by a mining engineer from the New York School of Mines and escorted by Colonel Richard I. Dodge, ventured into the area to confirm Custer’s reports and produced an even more favorable assessment.²⁷ The Army now could not stop the flood of whites into the Sioux lands. “They were conveyed out of the country,” wrote historian Judson E. Walker, “by military escort, imprisoned in

²⁴ Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, p. 264.

²⁵ Custer’s official report, in Hunt, *I Fought with Custer*, pp. 118-19.

²⁶ Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, pp. 261-66.

²⁷ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 67.

military posts, their property destroyed, and themselves turned over to civil authority, to be punished for disobedience of the orders of the federal Government. But all to no avail. Popular sympathy in the west was with them.”²⁸

Realizing the political and physical impracticability of keeping its own citizens out of the Black Hills, the United States government in 1875 began pressuring the Sioux to sell the territory. The Army, using stricter measures, could have kept a greater portion of the miners out, but that would have resulted in “a political upheaval” for the Grant Administration, a presidency already facing problems. The decision to attempt a purchase was logical.²⁹ In the spring of 1875, Grant summoned Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, and representative chiefs from all of the other bands to Washington in an attempt to gain their approval for the sale. The Sioux chiefs immediately refused, insisting that they had to consult with their people before making such an important decision. Frustrated but hopeful, the government arranged a special commission to meet with all of the Sioux in the autumn to discuss the matter.³⁰

In September of that year, the Allison Commission, named for its chairman Senator W.B. Allison, met with almost 15,000 Indians at a site eight miles east of the Red Cloud Agency. The Oglallas, Miniconjous, Brulés, Two Kettles, San Arcs, Yanktons, Hunkpapas, Blackfeet, Santees, Arapahos, and Northern Cheyennes sent representatives; however, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull refused to send any delegates from their respective bands to the council.³¹

²⁸ Judson E. Walker, *Campaigns of General Custer in the North-West, and the Final Surrender of Sitting Bull*, p. 32.

²⁹ Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 68.

³⁰ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, p. 231.

³¹ James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*, pp. 203-4.

Arguments among the Indians delayed the meeting for almost two weeks as distinct groups formed with differing opinions on how best to handle the proposal. The largest faction, led by Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, considered the Black Hills already lost and wanted the greatest amount of money for them, but others would not agree to depart with the sacred land. Because of incessant quarreling, the commissioners soon began to lose hope that they could induce the required “three-fourths” of the tribe to sign over the Black Hills.³²

The Indians could not, and would not, agree to anything. Several times the meetings turned into riots with the Sioux’s internal police having to restrain some of the young men from killing the government representatives. Finally, on September 23, the council ended abruptly as an armed Little Big Man, an Oglalla associate of Crazy Horse, stormed into the negotiation tent and threatened in a loud voice to kill the white men who were trying to steal his land. Indian soldiers promptly ushered him out, but the damage was done. Other warriors, caught up in the spirit, dashed their horses in front of the government officials, brandishing rifles and shouting the Sioux war cry, “Hoka-hey!” The meeting ended without bloodshed, but the belligerent demonstration convinced the members of the commission that they did not ever gain want to deal with such a large contingent of Sioux. They sought one final approach: a conference with only the chiefs present.³³

Three days later, the commission summoned twenty of the Indian leaders to the Red Cloud Agency, but the talks accomplished little as each chief stated his own price and would not agree to anything less. Their prices were staggering. Red Cloud

³² Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, p. 241.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-44.

demanded not only that the government “feed and clothe the Sioux for seven generations to come,” but make a monetary payment of \$600 million as well. The commission weakly proposed \$400,000 a year for mining rights in the Black Hills with the right to cancel with two year’s notice or \$6 million for the outright purchase. The chiefs refused, and the negotiations ended for good.³⁴

The government was in an embarrassing situation. The Treaty of 1868 explicitly excluded all whites from the Sioux lands and pledged that the government would use its military to stop white invaders. Seemingly, the Grant Administration faced two alternatives: employ vigorous force to keep non-Indians out of the Black Hills or find a justified reason for seizing the mineral-rich territory. The government did not choose either. Washington fully intended to have the Black Hills, but it would not blatantly break its treaty with the Sioux.³⁵

On November 3, 1875, President Grant discussed the situation with his cabinet and General Sheridan. Two decisions emerged from the meeting. The first was that the order barring miners from the Black Hills would remain in effect, but that the Army would make no moves to stop the trespassers. The second was that the hostiles of Sitting Bull’s bands stood in the way of progress and must settle on the reservation.³⁶ They had obstructed the sale of the Black Hills, raided the periphery of the “unceded territory,” resisted the advancement of the Northern Pacific railroad, disrupted the management of the reservations, and harassed friendly tribes.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 244-45.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 249.

³⁶ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskins*, p. 146.

³⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, p. 246.

The decision not to seal off the Black Hills meant that the area would soon fill with whites. Indeed, within four months, eleven thousand whites were inhabiting the town of Custer, and more than fifteen thousand were in the Black Hills. There were more whites in the area than Indians on the reservation.³⁸ Implementing the second decision would be more difficult. Government authorities needed a pretext to force the hostiles from the “unceded territory” in Wyoming and Montana onto the reservation. Searching for valid reasons, they concluded that, although the discovery of gold in the Black Hills had not currently caused an increase in Indian hostilities, the presence of Sitting Bull’s free-ranging bands in the adjacent region would inevitably threaten the safety of American citizens and, furthermore, these hostiles were in violation of the Treaty of 1868. The complexity of the Black Hills’ issues merely created an excuse to end the Indian problem on the Northern Plains and close the “uncertain and poorly observed truce” that had existed since 1868.³⁹ Military force would likely come into play. As the Commissioner of Indian Affairs later reported in March 1876, “it will probably be necessary to compel the northern non-treaty Sioux, and such outlaws from the several agencies as have attached themselves to these same hostiles, to cease marauding and settle down, as other Sioux have done.”⁴⁰

On December 6, 1875, Grant issued an order for all Indians in the “unceded territory” to move onto the reservation and report to an agency before the end of January. If they did not make the move within the fifty-plus days, the government would consider them hostile and enemies of the United States. The order was a declaration of war,

³⁸ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskins*, p. 146.

³⁹ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Orrin G. Libby, *The Arikara Narrative of Custer’s Campaign and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, p. 22.

although Grant and his staff did not really think that the Sioux would resist. They expected them, once threatened by the military, to come in “like lambs.”⁴¹

The ultimatum reached the agencies just before Christmas, and half-breeds and other reliable Indians immediately embarked on the mission to relay the word to Sitting Bull’s camps. The messengers set out in severe weather, which slowed their travel and hampered their ability to find the winter camps. Some came back without locating the hostiles, and several returned after the ultimatum date of January 31. Every band, however, received word of the order, but none reported to any agencies.⁴² On February 1 Secretary of the Interior Zachariah Chandler notified Secretary of War William W. Belknap that “Sitting Bull still refuses to comply with the directives of the Commissioner, the said Indians are hereby turned over to the War Department for such actions as you deem proper.” Two days later, Belknap informed Chandler that the Army had received orders “to take immediate measures to compel these Indians to remain upon their reservation.”⁴³ The United States had declared war.

The Indian Office placed the number of Sioux outside the agencies at approximately 3,000. This was probably accurate at the time, but as was the custom, many bands flocked to the agencies in the winter months for food and blankets, increasing enrollment and giving a false picture of Peace Policy success. The coming spring and summer, however, would see the largest departure of Indians from the Great Sioux Reservation since its creation.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, pp. 249-50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴³ Quoted in Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and the Little Bighorn*, p. 250.

⁴⁴ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, pp. 251-53.

With military action approved, Sheridan dispatched orders to his commanders authorizing them to commence a campaign against Sitting Bull's bands on February 7, 1876. "Unless they are caught before early spring," he wrote Secretary of Interior Chandler, "they can not be caught at all."⁴⁵ His campaign plan involved a three-pronged attack. A Montana column under Colonel John Gibbon, would consist of infantry and cavalry and move east from Fort Ellis, near present-day Bozeman, Montana, and along the Yellowstone River. A second, the Dakota column, originally headed by Custer but later placed under General Alfred H. Terry, would march west from Fort Abraham Lincoln near Bismarck, North Dakota, paralleling the Yellowstone. General George Crook would lead a third, the Wyoming column, northward from Fort Fetterman and into the Powder River country. The three columns would converge at a common center around the Bighorn or Little Bighorn Rivers.⁴⁶

Severe weather, as well as Custer's untimely recall to Washington for testimony in the Belknap Impeachment, postponed deployment of the Dakota column. Terry set a delayed departure date of April 6, but circumstances and weather again postponed the march.⁴⁷ Crook, on the other hand, commenced his movement with a combined force of 800 infantry and cavalry along the Bozeman Trail during a blizzard on March 1. Two weeks later, on the 16th, his scouts discovered a village of Oglalla Sioux (possibly Crazy Horse's) and Cheyenne along the Powder River. Crook sent Colonel Joseph J. Reynolds

⁴⁵ Quoted in Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 156.

⁴⁶ Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 156-57. In March and late April, Custer testified in Washington on the official corruption of forts and trading posts on the Upper Missouri. During the hearings, he incriminated Orvil Grant, the president's younger brother. This and Custer's publicized association with leading Democrats so angered Grant that he removed the officer from command of the Dakota column. Only the intercession of Terry, Sherman, and Sheridan, convinced the president to allow Custer to take part in the campaign, but only under Terry's immediate oversight.

and six troops of cavalry into the camp the following morning. Striking from multiple directions, Reynolds' men quickly took the village, but the Indians rallied and counterattacked, forcing the command to abandon its position in haste and allowing the Indians to recapture the majority of their pony herd and supplies. Crook, infuriated by Reynolds' failure to hold the village, returned wearily to Fort Fetterman to refit his unit. He would later have Reynolds court-martialed for lack of aggressiveness and indecisiveness.⁴⁸

While Terry waited for the weather to improve and for Custer's return from Washington, he attempted to carry out his portion of the winter campaign by directing Gibbon to move down the Yellowstone River from his western position in Montana. On April 3, Gibbon's column of nearly 500 men set out. For over a month, the column had no contact with the hostiles, continuously sending scouting parties along the river and its tributaries, but finally on May 16, Lieutenant James H. Bradley and his Crow scouts sighted a large village along the confluence of the Yellowstone and Tongue Rivers.⁴⁹ The column attempted to cross the river to execute an attack, but after several horses drowned, Gibbon abandoned the effort.⁵⁰

At last on May 17, the Dakota column left Fort Lincoln. Terry, the overall commander, led about 1,000 men, with Custer's Seventh Cavalry accounting for 750. Custer broke his command into two wings of three troop battalions, the right wing under Major Marcus A. Reno and the left under Captain Frederick W. Benteen. To their front,

⁴⁸ Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, pp. 83-85.

⁴⁹ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 170.

⁵⁰ Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 147.

well in advance, rode Lieutenant Charles A Varnum and thirty-nine Arikara scouts.⁵¹

They were a proud and confident lot. “Oh, it was a fine regiment, right enough,” recalled Private Charles Windolph of Troop H. “And there wasn’t a man in it who didn’t believe it was the greatest cavalry outfit in the entire United States Army.”⁵²

While Custer and Terry marched, Gibbon’s column continued to encounter Indian sign. On several occasions, the hostiles attacked the unit’s hunting parties, and on May 23, a group confronted and killed two soldiers and a civilian teamster.⁵³ Four days later, Bradley and his scouts located the large village, but now it stood on the Rosebud, only eighteen miles from Gibbon’s position. The exact reasons for Gibbon’s failure to attack are unknown. The following day, nonetheless, he received orders from Terry to march along the north side of the Yellowstone toward the mouth of Glendive Creek, where the general, unaware of Gibbon’s findings, believed the Indians to be. The colonel was then to cross the river and link-up with the Dakota column. Instead of reporting back that he had located a large village, Gibbon simply obeyed orders.⁵⁴

Gibbon met Terry aboard the steamboat *Far West* on June 9. By that time, Custer, who was scouting the Little Missouri, had yet to locate any Indians, Crook had not sent word of any contact, and only Bradley had seen a village. With that insight, Terry directed Gibbon to retrace his steps and establish a position at the mouth of the Rosebud.⁵⁵ Following the meeting, Terry pondered his next move. He suspected that the Sioux camp now lay somewhere at the base of the Bighorn Mountains, but wanted to

⁵¹ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 167-68.

⁵² Hunt, *I Fought with Custer*, p. 56.

⁵³ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, pp. 150-51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-56.

⁵⁵ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 172.

make certain that it had not moved back to the east. Gibbon's delayed reports and the fact that the Sioux had moved twice since Bradley's scouts had first sighted them made further reconnaissance urgent. Terry, therefore, dispatched an order for Major Reno to scout down the Powder and up the Tongue River, while Custer and Benteen would move on the south side of the Yellowstone. The entire regiment would eventually reunite at the mouth of the Tongue. If the reconnaissance did not find any Indians, Terry would have Custer and Gibbon converge on the Rosebud, and if the Sioux were there as Gibbon had reported, the two forces would have them trapped.

By June 19, Custer had completed his portion of the scout and was waiting at the mouth of the Tongue for word from Reno. That same day the major sent a message to Terry that he had scouted not only the Powder and Tongue, but had also crossed the Rosebud. The next day Reno rode into Custer's camp, and the entire regiment marched back to Terry's base camp, arriving on June 21. To an agitated Terry, Reno gave the full report of his reconnaissance. He had located an Indian trail, found a month-old camp of about 400 lodges on the Tongue, and then discovered a more recently abandoned site of the same village on the Rosebud. This confirmed Bradley's scouting reports, but it also changed Terry's plan because the Indians were no longer on the Rosebud.⁵⁶ Terry's anger with Reno arose from a concern that the major, who had gone beyond his orders by crossing the Rosebud during his mission, could have jeopardized the entire operation. Custer, too, was furious at Reno for his failure to pursue the hostiles. "I fear their failure to follow up the Indians has imperiled our plans by giving the village an intimation of our presence," Custer wrote to Libbie on the 21st. "Think of the valuable time lost!"⁵⁷ His

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 173-74.

⁵⁷ Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, p. 275.

opinion was that Reno should have continued on the trail and attacked. “Few officers,” he told a newspaper correspondent that same day, “have ever had so fine an opportunity to make a successful and telling strike, and few have ever so completely failed to improve their opportunity.”⁵⁸ Custer wanted victory for the Seventh Cavalry and obviously was convinced even then that Reno’s small force could have won.

Unbeknownst to the leaders of the Dakota or Montana columns, Crook, in fact, had fought those same Indians in the Battle of the Rosebud. The general’s soldiers had taken the field again on May 29 and halted at the Rosebud on the June 16. While the soldiers camped, Sioux scouts discovered the column, and the next morning as many as 700 warriors, representing all of the Teton Sioux bands and Northern Cheyenne, attacked. Colonel Anson Mills, a participant in the battle, recalled that the Indians had boldly charged into the soldiers, “knocking them from their horses with lances and knives, dismounting and killing them, cutting off the arms of some at the elbow in the middle of the fight and carrying them away.”⁵⁹ Throughout the fight, the Indians displayed surprising spirit, abandoning their old techniques of hovering at a safe distance and taking little risk. “They were in front, rear, flanks, and on every hilltop, far and near,” one soldier later reported. “I had been in several Indian battles, but never saw so many Indians at one time before, . . . or so brave.”⁶⁰ The fight forced Crook to abandon his campaign and return to the base camp on Goose Creek. He was short on supplies, had suffered twenty-eight dead and over fifty wounded, and believed that his command was

⁵⁸ Quoted in Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 238.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Stanley Vestal, *Warpath and Council Fire: The Plains Indians’ Struggle for Survival in War and Diplomacy, 1851-1891*, p. 225.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, p. 421.

not large enough to pursue such an immense Indian force.⁶¹ Terry and Custer would never receive word of the Indians' numbers or energetic fighting ability.

On the evening of June 21, without knowledge of the Indians' exact whereabouts or strength, Terry made a fateful decision. He would send Custer forward as a "swift-moving strike force" up the Rosebud to find the hostiles and drive them against Gibbon's blocking force on the Yellowstone. This reflected the uncertainty about the Indians' location for they could still be on the Rosebud or they could have turned in any direction. The general belief was that they would be somewhere in the middle, not quite approaching the Bighorn River, which was Crow territory.⁶²

Terry's written order to Custer left the cavalry commander a large degree of latitude. He was to follow the Indian trail that Reno had discovered on the Rosebud. If it turned toward the Little Bighorn, he should still continue southward to the headwaters of the Tongue and then towards the Little Bighorn. All the while, his element should continue "feeling constantly, to your left, so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southeast by passing around your left flank." Terry expected him to be at the mouth of the Little Bighorn by the 26th, yet the order did not place Custer on a time line.⁶³ In essence, the order was simply a suggestion for the cavalry commander, and Custer realized this when he copied in a letter to his wife the telling paragraph of the order: "It is of course impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement; and were it not possible to do so, the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 423.

⁶² Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 175.

⁶³ W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*, pp. 133-34.

precise orders, which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy.”⁶⁴

Custer had free rein to act as he saw fit and the confidence of his commander to make the right decision. Much would depend on his judgment as the situation developed. In confirmation, Lieutenant Bradley wrote on the same day in his journal: “. . . it is understood that if Custer arrives first he is at liberty to attack once he deems prudent. We have little hope of being in on the death, as Custer will undoubtedly exert himself to the utmost to get there first and win all the laurels for himself and his regiment.”⁶⁵

Terry, wanting Custer to have every advantage and possibly expecting imminent contact, offered him Major James Brisbin’s battalion from the Second Cavalry, but Custer declined. “He felt sure,” Edward S. Godfrey, then one of Custer’s lieutenants, later wrote of the flamboyant commander, “that the 7th Cavalry could whip any force that would be able to combine against it, that if the regiment could not, no other regiment in the service could; if they could whip the regiment, they would be able to defeat a much larger force, or, in other words, the reinforcement of this battalion could not save us from defeat.” Custer also wanted to maintain unit integrity and, of course, as he implied over the next few days, would not want the regiment to share its accomplishment with another.⁶⁶ He also declined Terry’s proposal that he take along Gibbon’s Gatling gun battery because it would be the only wheeled transportation in the column and slow down and limit his movement. But, he did accept the offer of six of Gibbon’s Crow scouts

⁶⁴ Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, pp. 275-76.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 247.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 134.

under the half-breed Mitch Bouyer, who knew the country where they would travel.⁶⁷ He was sure that he would find the Indians and sure of winning with what he had.

At noon on the 22nd, the Seventh Cavalry consisting of thirty-one officers, 566 enlisted men, thirty-five Indian scouts, and a dozen packers, guides, and other civilians began to move.⁶⁸ The men carried Springfield Model 1873 .45/55 single-shot carbines and Colt Model 1873 .45-caliber single-action revolvers with one hundred rounds per rifle and twenty-four per pistol.⁶⁹ There were no sabers present as Custer had ordered his men to turn them in a week earlier because of their noisiness and weight.⁷⁰ Custer, at the lead, began his march into immortality. As the cavalry rode away, scout and interpreter Fred Girard overheard General Terry say, “Custer is happy now, off with a roving command of fifteen days. I told him not to do as Reno did, but if he thought he could whip them to do so.”⁷¹ Custer until the very end believed he could.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.134.

⁶⁸ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 177.

⁶⁹ Douglas D. Scott, *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, pp. 166-68.

⁷⁰ E. A. Brininstool, *Troopers with Custer*, p. 124.

⁷¹ Quoted in Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 253.

CHAPTER 2

CUSTER'S LAST FIGHT

As Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer's Seventh Cavalry marched away from the Yellowstone base camp and into Sioux territory, its officers and men held firm notions about how to fight Indians and how the hostiles would react once threatened. In all, they believed that the hardest part of the campaign would involve catching the enemy, not defeating him. Three days later, however, these men would all have a very different opinion of Indian warfare.

In the late afternoon of June 22, Custer halted his column, having marched twelve miles. At sunset, the regimental trumpeter sounded "officers' call," and the subordinate leaders assembled at their commander's bivouac site. Lieutenant Edward S. Godfrey attended the meeting:

He took particular pains to impress upon the officers his reliance on their judgment, discretion, and loyalty. He thought, judging from the number of lodge-fires reported by Reno, that we might meet at least a thousand warriors; there might be enough young men from the agencies, visiting their hostile friends, to make a total of fifteen hundred. He had consulted the reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and the officials in Washington as to the probable number of 'Hostiles' (those who had persistently refused to live or enroll themselves at the Indian agencies), and he was confident, if any reliance was to be placed upon these reports, that there would not be an opposing force of more than fifteen hundred.

Custer went on to explain his reason for declining Major Brisbin's battalion of Second Cavalry and Gibbon's Gatling guns, emphasizing the importance of a unified command and his belief that the Seventh Cavalry alone could accomplish the mission.¹

Neither Custer nor Terry nor the Commission of Indian Affairs had a clear idea of the number of Indians that lay ahead. They had not received any reports from Crook,

¹ Quoted in W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*, p. 134.

who could have provided a realistic number. The assumption was that either column, Gibbon's or Custer's, could alone defeat any hostile force that it might encounter, but no one expected that the Indians would stand and fight a pitched battle. In the officers' minds, the campaign had come to the point that victory lay only in finding the enemy.

At 5:00 a.m. on the 23rd, the column resumed its march, following the Indian trail that Reno had earlier discovered, and eight miles later, the unit located the first of a series of abandoned Indian camps. At this site, Custer found a great number of wickiups, bent ribs of willow sticks and brush with their bases jammed into the ground and their tops drawn together and at one time covered by a blanket or hide.² Many of the younger soldiers and some of the officers assumed that the shelters were doghouses, misled by the number of coyote and wolf tracks in the area as these animals scavenged through the left-over debris of the deserted village. These temporary lodges, in fact, had quartered numerous young men and transient agency Indians.³

The command picked up the march again, discovering that the Indian trail continued to widen with fresher indications of travel. Horse droppings, only two days old, dotted the drag marks of numerous travois. "Our trail during all movements throughout the summer," recalled Wooden Leg, a Northern Cheyenne, "could have been followed by a blind man. It was a quarter to a half a mile wide at all places where the form of the land allowed that width."⁴ With this abundance of sign, Custer rightfully believed that his command was within thirty miles of the hostile camp. The column

² Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 135.

³ Mari Sandoz, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, p. 32.

⁴ Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, p. 207.

halted for the day at 5:00 p.m., having traveled close to thirty-three miles.⁵ If Custer were correct, he could find the Indians the next afternoon.

While Custer puzzled over the profusion of Indian sign, the Sioux camp was growing. Over the span of only six days, since breaking camp after fighting Crook on the Rosebud, the village, now situated in the Little Bighorn Valley, had more than doubled from 400 to 1,000 lodges, from 3,000 to 7,000 people, and from 500 to over 1,000 warriors. The fresh markings of travel that Custer saw came from newly arriving agency Indians as they converged on the village in groups of varying sizes. The Indian camps, stretching south to north from Shoulder Blade Creek to Medicine Tail Coulee and on the west bank of the river, crowded the valley in six separate tribal circles with the Hunkpapas farthest south followed by the Oglallas, Miniconjous, San Arcs, Blackfeet, Two Kettles, and Brulés. Even a few Yanktons and Santees had joined the camp. At the tail and farthest north were bands of Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho. The Sioux had chosen an appealing location to strike camp. Low grassy hills and benches filled the valley's west end, and on the eastern side of the valley, the Little Bighorn River meandered through cottonwood thickets in the shadows of a series of steep, ragged bluffs, rising at some points to over 300 feet above the river.⁶

On June 24, the Seventh Cavalry marched about twenty-eight miles and again passed several large abandoned campsites. Early that evening the Crow scouts, pushed far in advance of the column, returned with promising information on the hostile location. They reported that the trail continued but noted that it had turned to the west, following a

⁵ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 135.

⁶ Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*, p. 179.

tributary of the Rosebud toward the Little Bighorn. Custer now faced a decision. He could continue up the Rosebud to the upper Little Bighorn as Terry's order suggested, but the freshness of the Indian trail meant that the village likely lay on the lower portion of the river, barely a day's march away. To confirm the Crows' findings, Custer sent out other scouts: Lonesome Charley Reynolds, Lieutenant Charles A. Varnum, the mixed-blood Mitch Bouyer, and six Arikara.⁷ If the reports were true, he had found his quarry in less than two days. He was on their trail and could not leave it.

Custer called his officers together that night at around 9:30 and relayed what the Crows had reported. Realizing that the trail led over a low mountain pass to the Little Bighorn, Custer wanted to start the march at once. The command would move throughout the night and then conceal itself and rest the next day. During this time, the scouts could pinpoint the village, allowing Custer time to study the terrain and develop a sound plan for attack on the morning of the 26th, the day that Gibbon's column would reach the mouth of the river.⁸

The command began movement around midnight, marching six miles and then halting at 2:00 on a stretch of low ground where they could build small, smokeless fires for brewing coffee. At around 8:00, two Arikara scouts arrived with a message from Lieutenant Varnum, the chief of scouts. At daybreak from a hilltop known by the Crow scouts as the Crow's Nest, the Indian scouts had spotted smoke rising from the Little Bighorn Valley and recognized a moving spot in the distance as the Sioux's enormous pony herd. They insisted that it was the biggest camp and pony herd that any of them had

⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

⁸ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 136.

ever seen. “We scouts thought there were too many Indians for Custer to fight,” White-Man-Runs-Him, a Crow scout, recalled. “There were camps and camps and camps.”⁹

Custer hurried to the Crow’s Nest to see the village for himself. Near the butte, he met Varnum, who informed him that the Crow scouts had just seen three separate groups of Sioux warriors and were concerned that the hostiles had spotted the column and would warn the village. Custer knew he had to react quickly. By 9:00, he had reached the summit, but could not see the village reported by the Indians because the sun had risen, leaving a blanket of haze across the valley. He had no reason, however, to doubt that his scouts had seen the objective. From their description, Custer figured that the village lay only twelve to fifteen miles away.¹⁰ “The Crow scouts,” testified the Arikara scout Red Star, “insisted that the Dakota scouts had already seen the army and would report its coming and that they would attack Custer’s army. They wanted him to attack at once, that day, and capture the horses of the Dakotas and leave them unable to move rapidly.”¹¹ Their insistence that the command had been discovered weighed heavily on Custer’s next decision.

During Custer’s absence, Sergeant William A. Curtis and two men of Troop F had ridden back on the column’s trail to recover a box of hardtack that had fallen from one of the pack mules. As they approached the site, they discovered several Indians trying to pry open the box. The detachment had fired upon the hostiles but missed. Sergeant Curtis promptly reported the incident to his troop commander, Captain George W. Yates, who told Captain Myles W. Keogh, who in turn relayed the information to Captain Tom

⁹ White-Man-Runs-Him to Colonel Tim McCoy, 1919, in *Custer Myth*, pp. 21-23.

¹⁰ Edgar I Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 275.

¹¹ Orin G. Libby, *The Arikara Narrative of Custer’s Campaign and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, p. 92.

Custer. The younger Custer, recognizing the importance of the news, set off to inform his brother, reaching him as he left the Crow's Nest.¹² This report in addition to the Crows,' forced Custer's hand. His greatest fear seemed close to realization: the Indians were going to run before he could fight them.

At about 11:30, Custer returned to his command and called his officers together.

Captain Benteen, in his account of the battle, wrote of the meeting:

General Custer then told us that he had just come down from the mountains where our Crow scouts had been during the night, and that they had told him they could see teepee tops, lots of Indian ponies, dust, etc., but that he had looked through their telescopic glasses and that he could not see a thing¹³

He had not actually seen the village, but he had to trust his scouts. The morning's events convinced Custer that the soldiers had been discovered, and his experience told him that the Indians would not remain in place to allow for an attack the next morning. He did not know the exact location of the village, so he could not formulate a full plan. But, he had to act quickly, so he chose a reconnaissance by force with the entire regiment. His final plan would depend on developing circumstances.¹⁴ The size of the village did not concern him—his worry was that the village would break up and the Indians flee, denying his regiment the fight he sought.

By noon, the column had crossed the low mountain pass, commonly referred to as the Divide, at the head of Davis Creek and halted on the upper bank of Reno Creek. At this point, Custer called for his adjutant, Lieutenant William W. Cooke, to form the regiment into battalions with the purpose of reconnoitering or maneuvering for combat.

¹² Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, pp. 276-77.

¹³ E. A. Brininstool, *Troopers with Custer: Historic Incidents of the Battle of Little Big Horn*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 181-82.

The splitting of the unit, recalled Lieutenant Winfield S. Edgerly, was “to catch them [i.e., the Indians] in whatever direction they might flee.”¹⁵ Three troops, consisting of 140 officers and enlisted men, would fall under the command of Major Reno. Captain Benteen also took control of three troops, giving him a total of 125 men. Two troops under Captain Yates and three under Captain Keogh, a total of 225 men, remained with Custer, making up the third battalion. Captain Thomas M. McDougall and Troop B guarded the packtrain and trailed the command.¹⁶

Lieutenant Varnum and his Crow scouts had remained at the Crow’s Nest as the command moved forward. At noon, they rejoined the column and reported observing a group of Indians in the part of the village closest to the soldiers break camp and start to move downstream away from the unit. Custer took this as confirmation that the command had been discovered and the Indians were beginning to run.¹⁷

From the top of the Divide, the soldiers could see only a portion of the Little Bighorn Valley, but they could now make out the light haze about fifteen miles away that the scouts had reported as smoke from the village. At 12:05 p.m. Custer completed the division of his command and within ten minutes gave a verbal order for Benteen to begin movement to the left. Since a ridge obstructed any view to the south, Custer needed Benteen to reconnoiter the area to ensure that the Indians were not escaping in that direction.¹⁸ “My orders,” testified Benteen during the Reno Court of Inquiry, “were to proceed out into a line of bluffs about four or five miles away; to pitch into anything I

¹⁵ Quoted in C. Lee Noyes, “A Tale of Two Battles: George Armstrong Custer and the Attacks at the Washita and the Little Bighorn,” *Journal of the Indian Wars*, I (1999), p. 21.

¹⁶ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 182.

¹⁷ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, pp. 315-16.

¹⁸ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p.183.

came across and to send word back to Gen. Custer at once if I came across anything.”¹⁹

In a letter written to his wife a few days after the battle, Benteen said substantially the same thing, adding that he was to move “over the immense hills to the left in search of the valley which was supposed to be near by.”²⁰ Benteen’s element would serve the purpose of early warning against ambush or surprise. His orders were fairly open, and Custer left him to his own discretion if he did not find any Indians. Benteen could continue along his route until he was convinced that there were no Indians in that direction and then return to the main trail and the rest of the command.²¹

Custer had a valid concern that the Indians might escape to the south. The sightings earlier that morning had correctly placed the village on the lower Little Bighorn, but Custer had to know this for certain. If the hostiles were, in fact, on the upper portion of the river valley his attack from the north would drive them south and away from Gibbon’s column. Likewise, if the camp extended into the upper portion of the valley, Indian reinforcements from that direction could jeopardize Custer’s advance to the north, hitting him or Reno in the rear.²²

The plan to send Benteen to the left also met the intentions of Terry’s original order to Custer to keep feeling to his left in order to prevent the Indians from escaping around his flank to the south and west. Furthermore, although Custer did not know the exact location of the village, he knew that Sioux villages, for sanitary reasons and grazing purposes, often consisted of a series of camps spread along a stream. He did not

¹⁹ W. A. Graham, *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Record of Proceedings*, p. 135.

²⁰ Letter from Frederick W. Benteen to wife, 4 July 1876, in Frazier and Robert Hunt, *I Fought with Custer: The Story of Sergeant Windolph, Last Survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn*, p. 188.

²¹ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, pp. 317-18.

²² Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 182-83.

intentionally mean for Benteen to strike the village from the left, but the possibility of his hitting the southern or upper end of the village existed—and “experience had shown that the only way to defeat Indians was to strike from two or more sides at the same time.”²³

As Benteen scouted the south, the remainder of the regiment marched down Reno Creek. Custer and his two battalions moved on the right, while Reno and his battalion traveled on the left side. MacDougall’s packtrain brought up the rear, falling progressively farther behind.²⁴

Meanwhile, Benteen’s battalion had difficulty moving in the unreconnoitered, rough terrain of its designated sector. Natural obstacles pushed the battalion to the right until it was in sight of, and less than a mile from, Custer’s main trail. Benteen correctly concluded from the ruggedness of the country that no Indians were to the column’s left, so he moved back toward the main trail, coming out about a mile in front of the packtrain. At this point, he halted his battalion to allow the horses to water in a small, spring-fed morass.²⁵

Three miles ahead, Custer and Reno stopped at an abandoned village site, where the south fork of Reno Creek joined the main branch. A single teepee remained, containing the body of a warrior slain in the fight against Crook a week earlier. After inspecting the lodge, some of the scouts gathered around and set it on fire. “From this point,” stated scout George Herendeen in an interview with the *New York Herald* early in July, “we could see into the Little [Big] Horn valley, and observed heavy clouds of dust

²³ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, pp. 319-20.

²⁴ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p.183.

²⁵ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 136.

rising five miles distant. Many thought the Indians were moving away, and I think General Custer believed so”²⁶

At this time, another officer, Lieutenant R. R. Hare, spotted forty or fifty Indians between the lone teepee and the Little Bighorn. “They evidently discovered us,” he later testified, “because they disappeared at once.”²⁷ These observations further persuaded Custer and his officers that the Indians were fleeing, and the final report from interpreter Fred Girard removed any lingering doubt. From his position on a knoll to the right of the lone teepee, he observed the Indian movement and yelled out: “Here are your Indians, running like devils!”²⁸ The warriors spotted by Hare were, in fact, the rear guard of a smaller camp of sixty lodges moving forward to join the parent village, and, as this group moved, it likely produced part of the dust cloud so clearly visible to Custer and his men.²⁹

Custer first ordered the Arikara scouts to pursue the fleeing Sioux, but they refused. “If any man of you is not brave,” he berated them, “I will take away his weapons and make a woman of him.” The scouts laughed, but indicated through signs that they were ready to fight. Some would continue ahead with Reno while others moved out to capture the Sioux pony herd.³⁰ Custer then ordered Reno forward at a trot while his element followed. Reaching another fork of Reno Creek where the north branch joined, the column was within a mile of the Little Bighorn and within two miles of the village. Custer could clearly see the dust cloud from the village, a misperceived confirmation of the Indians’ actions. Although he had not heard from Benteen, he chose

²⁶ *New York Herald* (7 July 1876), in Graham, *The Custer Myth*, p. 258.

²⁷ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁹ Cyrus T. Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters*, p. 383.

³⁰ Libby, *Arikara Narrative*, pp. 121-122.

to attack and pressed Reno to cross the river. Custer sent his adjutant Lieutenant Cooke with a message directing Reno to “take as rapid a gait as you think prudent and charge the village afterward and you will be supported by the whole outfit.”³¹ Although the decision to attack seemed abrupt, General Sherman later stated that, in his opinion, Custer’s attack was neither desperate nor rash in view of the circumstances and rules of Indian fighting, and that Custer “could do nothing but attack when he found himself in the presence of Indians.”³² As the attack started, Benteen was approximately two to three miles behind the column.³³

Reno continued his advance at a gallop toward the river while Custer’s troops watered their mounts in Reno Creek. Captain Keogh and Lieutenant Cooke accompanied the major to the river and were riding back when the interpreter Girard overtook them. He said that he and his Crow scouts believed that the Indians were not running away, but were moving upstream to fight Reno. He had alerted Reno, but the officer had continued crossing the river. “I knew that Gen. Custer was laboring under the impression that the Indians were running away,” Girard later testified, “and it was important for him to know that they were not, but were coming to meet us.”³⁴ Scout George Herendeen also recalled that a “Crow scout called out in Crow that the Sioux were coming up to meet us.”³⁵

The Sioux were coming, but not because they had discovered the column earlier that morning. The Arikara scouts led by Custer’s favorite guide Bloody Knife had moved out in front of Reno’s column after the commander’s rebuke. Near the fording

³¹ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 212.

³² Quoted in Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 280.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁴ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

site that Reno would use, they had fired upon a small group of Indians, killing a young boy and perhaps as many as six women. They soon stopped their pursuit of the Indians when a large herd of 200 Sioux ponies came into view. The scouts then crossed the river and were driving the herd away from the village when Sioux warriors starting chasing them.³⁶ The hostiles had not known of the regiment's position and, as Reno's men charged down the valley, they reacted the only way they could at that point: they fought. "A cry was raised that the white soldiers were coming," recalled Gall, a noted Hunkpapa war chief, "and orders were given for the village to move immediately. Reno swept down so rapidly on the upper end that the Indians were forced to fight."³⁷ Custer had surprised them.

Although Custer would never know, he had established one major tactical condition for a successful battle, and those who condemn Custer for attacking a prepared village have little to stand on. The Indians whom Sergeant Curtis, the soldier who returned to recover a box of hardtack, saw were not Sioux, but men from Little Wolf's band of Cheyenne. They did not warn the village and reached it only after the fight because their chief elected to follow the soldiers and stay out of trouble.³⁸ A few Indians may have earlier sighted the column and attempted to warn the village, but most did not take their alert seriously.

When the final alarm rang through the village, many of the Indians did not believe it and were unprepared. "I did not think it possible," said Low Dog, an Oglalla warrior,

³⁶ Greg Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, p. 32; Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 260; Libby, *Arikara Narrative*, pp. 150-52.

³⁷ Gall, quoted in *Chicago Tribune* (26 June 1886), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 88.

³⁸ Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg*, pp. 250-51.

“that any white men would attack us, so strong as we were.”³⁹ Two Moon, a prominent Cheyenne chief, was busy watering his horses when he saw the dust cloud from Reno’s charge.⁴⁰ Wooden Leg, recovering from a dance the night before, was napping under a tree when the attack began.⁴¹ Red Horse, a Miniconjou chief, was digging turnips with four women when Reno charged.⁴² Pretty White Buffalo, a Hunkpapa woman, said seven Cheyenne had set out for the Spotted Tail Agency that morning and two returned at mid-day to warn of the column. As they spread the word, Reno’s element appeared west of the river and began firing into the camp.⁴³ “I did not know anything about Reno’s attack until his men were so close that the bullets went through the camp, and everything was in confusion. The horses were so frightened we could not catch them,” recalled Iron Thunder, a Miniconjou.⁴⁴ Black Elk, a thirteen-year-old Oglalla boy, was swimming and knew nothing of an attack until he heard someone shouting in the Hunkpapa camp: “The chargers are coming! They are charging! The chargers are coming!”⁴⁵ Gall, visiting another portion of the village, scurried to his lodge to check on his family and found his two wives and three children dead from the bullets of Reno’s men.⁴⁶ Sitting Bull, of all people, was lying in his teepee recovering from a Sun Dance performance when he learned of Reno’s attack.⁴⁷

³⁹ Low Dog, quoted in *Leavenworth Weekly Times* (18 Aug 1881), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Two Moon in *McClure’s Magazine* (September 1898), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 102.

⁴¹ Marquis, *Wooden Leg*, pp. 216-217.

⁴² “The Battle of Little Bighorn. An Eyewitness Account by the Lakota Chief Red Horse recorded in pictographs and text at the Cheyenne River Reservation, 1881.”

⁴³ Pretty White Buffalo in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, (19 May 1883), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 85.

⁴⁴ Iron Thunder, quoted in *Leavenworth Weekly Times* (18 Aug 1881), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 78.

⁴⁵ John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, pp. 108-9.

⁴⁶ Gall in *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (18 July 1886), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Sitting Bull in *New York Herald* (16 November 1877), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 69.

If the Indians were not running, why was a dust cloud visible to the soldiers? The Indians observed by Lieutenant Hare were members of a relocating camp, and their movement would have caused some of the dust. Another portion of the explanation likely lies with the Indians' immense pony herds. Many Indian accounts, moreover, mention a daily moving of large pony herds to better grass and water. The routine activities of a village numbering several thousand people, with at least one pony per person, in Montana during a dry summer would alone create a considerable dust cloud.

At this point, Custer's final plan began to take shape. If he had intended to follow Reno, he now changed his mind. Reno had not made heavy contact, but reports indicated that the Indians were coming to fight him. To Custer that made sense because he expected the warriors to fight a delaying action as far away from the village as possible in order to allow women and children a chance to break camp and run. The fact that warriors were separating from the village also created a great tactical opportunity because it was far easier to flank an advancing force than a retreating one. "By dashing down the river," wrote Custer expert W. A. Graham, "he would cut in behind them, and hit them from the rear, and he would send for Benteen and put him into action in the center, between Reno and himself."⁴⁸ Tasting victory, Custer's soldiers remounted and began moving along the bluffs to the north. In Custer's mind, it was Washita all over again.

Moving in parallel columns of two's, Custer's troops galloped up the steep incline. After traveling about a mile, the command halted, and Custer got his first real look at the village. He viewed the valley with his Crow scouts and orderly trumpeter for the day John Martin. They at first could not see Reno, his element hidden by the timber

⁴⁸ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 293.

along the river, but they could see the village. The encampment *was* large, and in the confusion of battle, it certainly looked like what Custer expected: a fleeing village. Only women and children were visible, tearing down lodges and scurrying about. “Hurrah, boys,” Custer shouted, turning in his saddle and waving his hat at his men, “We’ve caught them napping!”⁴⁹

For whatever reason Custer had turned north, he now had to get the remainder of the regiment into the fight. Reno had not charged into the village, but had formed a skirmish line, his right flank in a pocket of timber on the river bend and a mere 200 yards from the camp’s southern point. Custer probably reasoned that the majority of Sioux warriors were speeding to repulse this attack. He was now in position to hit the village on its flank, but he had to find a fording site and get Benteen and the packtrain linked with rest of the unit immediately. He needed every soldier and the extra ammunition.⁵⁰

Custer quickly conferred with Cooke and other officers. As the march resumed, Tom Custer rode to his company and instructed Sergeant Daniel Kanipe to ride back to Captain MacDougall with orders from the commander. “Tell MacDougall,” he said, “to bring the packtrain straight across the high ground—if packs get loose don’t stop to fix them, cut them off. Come quick. Big Indian camp.” As Kanipe departed, Custer signaled the element to advance. Some of the men could not control their horses and broke into a gallop past Custer. “Boys, hold your horses,” Kanipe heard Custer shout, “there are plenty of them down there for us all!”⁵¹ The command swung to the right and down a long, narrow ravine, moving in a single column because of the restricted terrain.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 290.

⁵⁰ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 185-86.

⁵¹ Sergeant Daniel Kanipe in *Greensboro Daily Record* (27 April 1924), Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 249.

After a mile, the ravine opened into a broad coulee known as the Medicine Tail that ran toward the river, and Custer supposed it would provide a fording site.⁵²

Custer was anxious to get Benteen and his forces into the fight, so he sent another courier. This time he used Trumpeter Martin, a recent immigrant from Italy where he was known as Giovanni Martini. Custer spouted out verbal instructions, but because the soldier had yet to master English, Cooke also wrote the instructions for him to give to Benteen. Hastily, he scribbled: “Benteen. Come on. Big Village. Be Quick. Bring Packs. W.W. Cooke. P. bring pacs (sic).”⁵³

Controversy exists over whether Custer ever sent any additional instructions to Reno. One account, related by Private Theodore Goldin, was that Custer sent him to the subordinate commander with a written message. Goldin stated that he did not know the contents of the letter and that Reno merely glanced at it and placed it in his shirt pocket.⁵⁴ Over the years, some historians have speculated that the message read: “Crowd them as hard as you can. We will soon be with you.”⁵⁵ Regardless, Major Reno later denied ever having received the message, saying that he had never known of any changes to the plan and had expected Custer to back him. In his official report, written a few days after the battle, Reno did not, however, show that he felt his commander had been negligent in notifying him of a change in plans: “He was fully confident that they [the hostiles] were running away, or he would not have turned from me.”⁵⁶

⁵² Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 186.

⁵³ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 293.

⁵⁴ Brady, *Indian Fights and Indian Fighters*, pp. 270-71.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 335.

⁵⁶ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1876*, p. 479; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 335.

Custer's couriers notified Benteen's element, but the reaction was not what Custer expected. Lieutenant Godfrey heard Sergeant Kanipe call out as he passed "we've got em" which led some in Benteen's command to surmise that Custer or Reno had taken the village.⁵⁷ Lieutenant Edgerly, likewise, gained the wrong impression from the orders. "I heard Trumpeter Martin speak to the orderly behind Capt. Benteen. He was laughing and seemed much elated," Edgerly remembered. "He said it was the biggest village he had ever seen and that they had found the Indians asleep in their teepees; that Major Reno was charging it and killing everything, men, women, and children."⁵⁸ Benteen himself ignored the urgency. "I asked Martin, after reading the note, about the village," he testified in 1879. "He said the Indians were all 'skedaddling;' therefore there was less necessity for me to go back for the packs. I could hear no firing at this time."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, when Martin turned his horse back on the trail and watched Custer and the command continue into Medicine Tail Coulee, he was the last white man to see the element alive. Crow scouts, released by Custer because he did not expect them to fight, watched from a hill overlooking the ravine. What actually happened to Custer and his portion of the command is a matter of contention. The only stories that exist are those of the Crow scouts and the hostiles, and they are equally confusing.

The speculation is that Custer again divided his command after sending Martin back. He sent Yates' two troops into the coulee toward the river and held Keogh's three on a ridge separating the coulee from the next drainage. Yates would hold the crossing site and also present a demonstration to draw pressure from Reno while Keogh protected

⁵⁷ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 176.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Benteen's approach. As the command split, Custer's youngest brother Boston, who had been with the packtrain, arrived, having passed Martin enroute. He had heard the fighting and raced to join his two brothers. It is likely that he would have informed Custer that Benteen had ended his reconnaissance, moved back onto the trail, and linked up with the packtrains. With this information, Custer would now wait for Benteen to give him the added force he needed, but, as he did, two developments sealed the command's fate.⁶⁰

First, Benteen had not reacted to Kanipe's verbal message to MacDougall and continued along at a slow trot. When Martin arrived with the written message, Benteen still did not speed up his approach. At that point, only a gallop would have possibly put him into the Custer fight.⁶¹ Secondly, Reno did not hold his skirmish line. After fifteen minutes, he withdrew into the woods along the river. Pressured by the hostiles, he ordered a retreat across the river and to the bluffs where Custer had first viewed the river valley. In the retreat, Reno suffered most of his casualties, forty dead and thirteen wounded. The retreat freed numerous Indians to turn and fight the new threat: Custer. Lieutenant Godfrey, after interviewing many of the Indians who had fought in the battle, wrote:

The Indians say if Reno's position in the valley had been held, they would have been compelled to divide their strength for the different attacks, which would have caused confusion and apprehension, and prevented the concentration of every able-bodied warrior upon the battalion under Custer; that at the time of the discovery of Custer's advance to attack, the chiefs gave orders for the village to move, to break up; that at the time of Reno's retreat, this order was being carried out, but as soon as Reno's retreat was assured, the order was countermanded, and the squaws were

⁶⁰ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 186-87.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

compelled to return to the pony herds; that the order would not have been countermanded had Reno's forces remained fighting in the bottom.⁶²

Benteen, instead of rushing to join Custer, joined Reno on a hilltop where they remained for two days.

Meanwhile, Custer still waited on Benteen's arrival. From his vantage point on East Ridge, he could see Yates' element at the Medicine Tail Coulee fording site as well as Benteen's expected approach. Yates was holding his position, but the Indian resistance was growing as warriors broke from the Reno fight. Keogh's three troops still controlled the ridge separating Medicine Tail Coulee from the next drainage to the north, Deep Coulee.⁶³ But where was Benteen?

As the Indian advance increased, Yates could no longer hold the fording site. "As we rushed them the white warriors dismounted to fire, but they did very poor shooting," recalled Low Dog. "They held their horses' rein on one arm while they were shooting, but their horses were so frightened that they pulled the men all around, and a great many of their shots went up in the air and did us no harm."⁶⁴ The demonstration had worked by drawing Indians away from Reno, but with that officer's retreat and Benteen's sluggish response, it had worked too well. Yates fought a deliberate withdrawal northward from the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee, up the slopes of a narrow hill, Butler Ridge, and toward a rendezvous point with Custer on the higher Nye-Cartwright Ridge. The Indians were now moving in strength through the vacated coulees, placing enemy to Custer's south and west.

⁶² Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 147.

⁶³ Michno, *Lakota Noon*, pp. 121-22.

⁶⁴ Low Dog in *Leavenworth Weekly Times* (18 August 1881), in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 75.

To the east of Yates, Keogh's men held off Gall's warriors as they made their way up Medicine Tail Coulee, and, although not seriously threatened, he probably realized that Yates was in trouble and that the Indians coming through Deep Coulee, to his rear, might isolate the two elements from one another. He began to withdraw northward to unite with Yates and the remainder of the command.⁶⁵

From Nye-Cartwright, Custer could clearly see the mass of Indians in Deep Coulee, where, in time, they could encircle him from the north. He had to deploy away from Deep Coulee to keep the Indians between him and Reno.⁶⁶ By moving north and downstream, Custer continued to draw the majority of Indians after him and away from the fording site. The Indians would fall between him and the expected reinforcements from Benteen, thus, in theory, creating a situation for a later combined attack from two different directions. The sight of the great dust cloud moving away from him on the opposite bank may have further convinced Custer that the village was running, and he would eventually still need to move farther downstream to cut it off after he had defeated the foe at hand.⁶⁷

Custer moved his command north and to the west of Deep Coulee and took up a position on Calhoun Hill, named for the Troop L commander who fought and died there. Keogh's men soon joined, but most were on foot, the Indians having stampeded their mounts as the element had formed another dismounted skirmish line while enroute. The meeting place formed the southern end of a high ridge that extends a half mile northward

⁶⁵ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 188-89.

⁶⁶ Michno, *Lakota Noon*, p. 154.

⁶⁷ Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 447.

from the river. The elevation is known as Battle Ridge, and along it and the slopes to the east and west, Custer's Last Stand took place.⁶⁸

On Calhoun Hill, Keogh's battalion deployed into a blocking position: Calhoun's L farthest south, Tom Custer's C in the middle, and Keogh's I in the north. Custer and Yates' element continued looking for a place to maneuver. Although they had been in contact for over an hour, the command had not suffered heavy casualties. Firing had mostly come from a distance, but the halt on Calhoun Hill gave the Indians an opportunity to launch their first large-scale attack. In the face of a charge by mounted warriors, Keogh's troops volley-fired and drove them back.⁶⁹

The failed charge and heavy fire of the soldiers forced the Indians to search for an alternate means of victory. Taking advantage of the hills, gullies, rocks, and sagebrush clumps, the hostiles realized that they no longer needed to make any charges. From behind concealed positions, they took well-aimed shots with their rifles and fired volleys of arrows into the cavalymen. Both Sioux and Cheyenne warriors later admitted that they inflicted the greatest number of casualties by fighting in this manner.⁷⁰ Facing a concealed enemy and an onslaught of fire, the command still waited for a reinforcement that would never come.

Each troop made its last stand, but at the northern end of Battle Ridge, now known as Custer Hill, the remaining soldiers of Troops E and F and the headquarters element fought and died. About forty of the soldiers killed their horses and used them as breastworks, steadily firing from behind them until they ran out of ammunition or

⁶⁸ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p.189.

⁶⁹ Michno, *Lakota Noon*, pp. 158, 168.

⁷⁰ George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, p. 339.

suffered a mortal wound. The fatal blow to the command came from north when Crazy Horse, having crossed the river below the village, led a contingent of warriors up Deep Ravine, completing the encirclement.⁷¹ The annihilation of Custer's entire element had lasted about two hours.⁷² "All the men were lying on their faces and appeared to have been shot in the side," testified Captain MacDougall, whose men held the task of burying the dead of Troop E. "I thought they had fought as best they could and were attacked from both sides."⁷³

Four miles to the south, Captain Thomas B. Weir, hearing the fighting and disgusted with Benteen's and Reno's inaction, rallied his men of Troop D and headed out to reinforce Custer. They only made a short distance, reaching a high hill later named for the troop commander, before the Indians spotted their movement and forced them back to Reno. Their charge would have come too late anyway for Custer's fight was almost over. "We saw a good many Indians," recalled Lieutenant Edgerly of his view from Weir Point, "galloping up and down and firing at objects on the ground."⁷⁴

The seven remaining cavalry troops continued to hold off the Indians by entrenching themselves on Reno Hill. During the night, they heard the Indians blowing bugles taken from Custer's dead soldiers. Occasionally, Benteen and Reno's own buglers would call back, knowing if they heard a response it was coming from Custer's men. They never did.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 190-91.

⁷² Sandoz, *Battle of the Little Bighorn*, p. 170.

⁷³ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, p. 197.

⁷⁴ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 191.

⁷⁵ Walter M. Camp, *Custer & Company: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight*, p. 92.

Daylight brought a renewed attack, but the soldiers, although exhausted, held off the Sioux and Cheyenne. By noon, the fighting had tapered off completely. As the soldiers scanned the river valley that evening, they watched the Indians set fire to the valley's dry prairie grass and observed through the smoke screen a tremendous procession of Indians, ponies, dogs, and travois headed, to their relief, in the opposite direction toward the Bighorn Mountains. Still uncertain of the whereabouts of Custer, Benteen and Reno's men continued to hold their positions.⁷⁶

On the morning of the 27th, a column of soldiers appeared in the valley, leading some of those on Reno Hill to believe it was Custer. A white scout, Muggins Taylor, approached with a note from Terry to Custer, dated June 26, stating that Terry had found some of Custer's Crow scouts and that they had reported that the "column had been whipped and nearly all had been killed" but that he refused to believe it. A little while later, Lieutenant Bradley arrived with word that he and his scouts had confirmed the Crows' reports and found 197 bodies. The news of Custer's tragic end shocked the survivors and had the same effect on Terry and his staff as they soon arrived in the position.⁷⁷

The remainder of the command shortly left the hill to see the battlefield and discovered, as Lieutenant Godfrey remembered, "a scene of sickening ghastly horror." The Indians had stripped, scalped, and mutilated the bodies, and the remains now lay bloating in the summer sun. Custer, although naked, was not butchered. "The General was not mutilated at all," Godfrey later wrote. "He laid [sic] on his back, his upper arms on the ground, the hands folded or so placed as to cross the body above the stomach: his

⁷⁶ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 145.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

position was natural and one that we had seen hundreds of times while [he was] taking cat naps during halts on the march. One hit was in the front of the left temple, and one in the left breast at or near the heart.”⁷⁸

On the 28th, the survivors buried Custer’s slain. The command had a limited number of shovels, so the soldiers could dig only shallow graves using knives and axes to chop up the ground. Although the dead officers received better care, few of the graves were deeper than twelve to fourteen inches, and some of the slain received a minimal burial, having only their faces covered by dirt.⁷⁹

A more pressing issue of caring for the wounded now faced the commanders. In the early morning of June 29, the column, exhausted and burdened with the injured, moved down the Little Bighorn to its mouth at the Yellowstone. Waiting there was Grant Marsh’s steamboat *Far West*. With the wounded aboard, Marsh begin a fifty-four hour journey to the Seventh Cavalry Headquarters at Bismarck, Dakota Territory. Only forty-four days had passed since Custer and Terry had marched from Fort Abraham Lincoln with the band playing “Garry Owen.”⁸⁰

Custer-expert W. A. Graham best summarized the events of June 25, 1876.

The tactics of the Indians on that day resulted in their doing to Custer exactly what Custer had planned to do to them. And they were able to do it because they had the leaders, the arms, and the overwhelming forces, none of which facts were known or appreciated by the 7th Cavalry. Their numbers had been underestimated; their leadership and fighting capacity undervalued; their superiority in arms not even suspected. The 7th Cavalry paid the penalty for national stupidity.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Quoted in Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 192-93. Custer died as a result of bullet wounds.

⁷⁹ Camp, *Custer & Company*, p. 96.

⁸⁰ Scott, *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, p. 22-23.

⁸¹ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 294.

Custer had expected the Indians and his subordinate leaders to act in a certain way. His experience, perceptions, and expectations had failed him.

CHAPTER 3

JUSTIFICATION OF THE ATTACK

Why would Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer have attacked such a large concentration of Sioux and Cheyenne? How could an experienced commander with the perceived best Indian-fighting regiment on the Great Plains have been destroyed by an undisciplined, lowly touted band of hostiles? Some have argued, as General Samuel D. Sturgis did shortly after the battle, that Custer was “insanely ambitious of glory” and had “made his attack recklessly, earlier by thirty-six hours than he should have, and with his men tired out from forced marches.”¹ Over the years, others, among them Stephen Ambrose, Edgar I. Stewart, Fred Dustin, Frederick Van de Water, Earl A. Brininstool, C. E. DeLand, and Roger Darling, have echoed that view. They depict Custer as insubordinate, callous, egotistical, and tactically inept, and they underscore the overwhelming number of Indians and the village’s immensity as proof that Custer acted rashly, ignoring common sense and his scouts’ advice that the Seventh Cavalry could not possibly win on that day.

On the other hand, while fully impossible to know the abstract thoughts that may have guided some of Custer’s actions, it is feasible to study the prior events and tactical opinions that would have molded and shaped the officer’s military mind. Custer at times certainly displayed the aforementioned traits, but understanding what happened at the Little Bighorn requires assessment of what Custer saw and expected on the morning of June 25, 1876. Those perceptions and expectations, more than careerism, political ambition, vanity, and inexperience, explain his conduct on that fateful day. In the context

¹ Quoted in Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend*, p. 45.

of his fifteen years of military experience and that day's events, Custer, justifiably confident of victory, launched his attack in an authorized and tactically sound manner.

Custer was popular, precariously involved in politics, but above all, a solid Indian fighter. Allegations about his inexperience fighting the Plains Indians are unfounded. Actually, only three other officers, at the time, could rival him in that regard: General George S. Crook, General Nelson A. Miles, and Colonel Ranald S. MacKenzie. The former had won his reputation earlier against the Paiutes of Oregon and the Apaches of the Southwest, tribes whose fighting styles varied significantly from those of the Sioux and Cheyenne. In his initial efforts on the Great Plains, Crook failed miserably against the Sioux at the Rosebud, and, although he would receive credit for capturing Crazy Horse in 1877, his most notable fame would come from his failure to bring in Geronimo in 1886. This is not to say that Crook was not a great Indian fighter, but that he was no better than Custer. Miles, at the time of Little Bighorn, had performed only adequately during the Red River War of 1874-75 against the Kiowa, Southern Cheyenne, and Comanche as had MacKenzie, whose most famous fight came in September 1874 at Palo Duro Canyon where he used the same tactics that Custer had employed at the Battle of the Washita in 1868 and tried to use at the Little Bighorn.² With the exception of Crook, Custer had more experience fighting Indians than any other commander in the three columns that set out in 1876. He was, in fact, the only one who had faced Sitting Bull's Sioux before and won.

Custer's tactics stemmed from his and other officers' experiences on the Great Plains; no school or field manual existed to guide them on how best to wage Indian

² Stephen Longstreet, *War Cries on Horseback: The Story of the Indian Wars of the Great Plains*, pp. 43-44.

warfare. Although it faced Indian opposition on the Plains for almost fifty years, the United States Army never developed a formal set of instructions for battling these nomads. Fighting the Indians was a “long-running police action” with the army’s task understood but not exactly defined; hence, Army leaders paid little attention to strategic and tactical theory. “Organization and tactics were always directed toward possible wars with conventional, European-style military powers, and tactical manuals and West Point teaching described this kind of warfare,” wrote historian Thomas W. Dunlay. “Indian fighting, it was assumed, would soon be a thing of the past; conventional warfare would become the army’s principal responsibility in the future.”³

Although the War Department did not authorize a manual on Indian fighting, officers did recognize a theory in the absence of doctrine. One portion of the theory was the strategic concept of winter warfare. This time of cold, snow, and ice gave the army the best chance of finding the Indians and negated the Indians’ advantages of mobility, their grass-fed ponies being weaker than the cavalry’s grain-fed horses, and of evasion, since the severe weather locked the hostiles in their camps. If the village fled under the attack, the Army could bring “total war” by destroying the remaining supplies and lodges. A second concept was that of converging columns from three or more directions in an effort to trap the Indians within an area. Commanders applied this same technique at the tactical level by striking an Indian village from two or more directions, effectively encircling it and preventing the escape of its inhabitants. Dawn was the preferred time of attack.⁴

³ Thomas W. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860-1890*, p. 73.

⁴ Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899*, pp. 36-38, 44-45.

With these loose tenets of warfare, officers received wide latitude and operated on an almost ad hoc basis, attacking when they deemed necessary. General Sheridan reflected in 1876 on what guidance he could have provided his subordinates. “No specific directions,” he explained, “could be given as no one knew exactly, and no one could have known where these Indians were, as they might be here to-day and somewhere else to-morrow.”⁵ The Indians thrived on unconventional tactics, often employing decoys, ambush, and evasion. “Strategy loses its advantages against an enemy who accepts few or none of the conventionalities of civilized warfare,” stated Edward S. Farrow, a veteran of the Indian Wars. “The Indian is present one day and when next heard from is marauding in another state or territory”⁶

The one constant that the officers on the Plains recognized was the flight of a village after an attack; hence, finding their elusive quarry obsessed officers more than fighting them. “The hardest task in Indian warfare was catching the Indians, not defeating them once caught,” wrote historian Robert Utley. “Given the chance, Indians would almost always flee, especially if their families were threatened. They rarely fought unless clearly favored to win, and even then not if casualties seemed likely. For the soldiers, victory, even battle, thus depended on surprise.”⁷

Custer’s first experience with Indians confirmed this mindset. In the spring of 1867, he commanded the Seventh Cavalry on the expedition led by General Winfield Scott Hancock against raiding bands of southern Oglalla Sioux and Southern Cheyenne.

⁵ Sheridan’s report dated 25 Nov 1876 in “Report of the Secretary of War [1876], quoted in C. Lee Noyes, “A Tale of Two Battles: George Armstrong Custer and the Attacks at the Washita and the Little Bighorn,” *Journal of the Indian Wars*, I (1999), p. 9.

⁶ Edward S. Farrow, *Mountain Scouting: A Hand-book for Officers and Soldiers on the Frontiers*, p. 239.

⁷ Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 76.

To his chagrin, the enemy was far from conventional, difficult to find, capable of practically disappearing almost without a trace, prone to mount ambushes, and rarely willing to fight unless he dramatically outnumbered the opponent. It took months before Custer's first confrontation against Pawnee Killer's Oglallas, and the fight was not decisive.⁸ Recalling one of his fruitless pursuits, Custer concluded that the greatest task in Indian fighting was locating the prey before he fled.

So long as they kept united and moved in one body, their trail was as plainly to be seen and as easily followed as if made by a heavily laden wagon train. We were not called upon to employ time and great watchfulness on the part of our scouts to follow it. But when it was finally clear to be seen that, in the race as it was then being run, the white man was sure to win, the proverbial cunning of the red man came to his rescue and thwarted the plans of his pursuers. Again dividing his tribe, as when first setting out from the village, into numerous small parties, we were discouraged by seeing the broad well-beaten trail suddenly separate into hundreds of indistinct routes, leading fan-shape in as many different directions. What was to be done?⁹

Although aggravated by the difficulties of fighting this type of enemy, Custer was soon to experience an extremely successful campaign, one that would establish his reputation on the Great Plains and shape the tactics of the military stationed there. That event was the Battle of the Washita.

This single fight produced a formula that should have ensured military success against the Indian tribes of the region. It called for the effective mobilization of troops and a simultaneous attack from multiple directions by units of equal, or nearly equal, strength against an unsuspecting village. The only tactical difference from the Battle of the Little Bighorn was that Custer attacked Black Kettle's Southern Cheyenne in the

⁸ George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains, or Personal Experiences with Indians*, pp. 40-43, 73-97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

winter and before full daylight. But, the similarities between his and the enemy's initial actions during that battle and the one eight years later are striking.¹⁰

In November 1868, Custer received explicit orders from Sheridan to move "toward the Washita River, the supposed winter seat of the hostile tribes: to destroy their villages and ponies, to kill or hang all warriors, and bring back all women and children."¹¹ The foe he faced was an enormous winter camp containing Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahos, Apaches, and Southern Cheyennes. On November 26, in a snowstorm, Custer's Osage scouts struck the trail of a raiding party returning from Kansas to villages in Oklahoma. The command followed it to the river, arriving at 2:00 a.m., and Custer promptly accompanied his scouts forward to view the objective. The scouts, pointing toward the river, reported in broken English, "Heaps Injuns down there." Custer thought he could make out the shape of a large body of animals, but he could not see the village. Only the distant tinkling of bells and the bark of a dog convinced him that a village actually existed.¹²

Although he did not know of the camp's exact dimensions or which tribe occupied it, he gathered his officers and devised a scheme of attack. "The general plan," Custer later wrote, "was to employ the hours between then and daylight to completely surround the village, and at daybreak, or as soon as it was barely light enough for the purpose, to attack the Indians from all sides."¹³ Custer divided his column into four equal detachments. One group would swing around to the far end of the village, while two

¹⁰ Noyes, "A Tale of Two Battles," pp. 15-16.

¹¹ DeBenneville Randolph Keim, *Sheridan's Troopers on the Border: A Winter Campaign on the Plains*, p. 103.

¹² Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, p. 233.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

others would proceed to the sides. Custer stayed with the fourth detachment at his present location. Once the detachments were in position, they would wait in place until first light, when Custer would give the signal to attack: the regimental band at his side opening into “Garry Owen.”¹⁴

“He had made no reconnaissance, held nothing back in reserve, was miles away from his wagon train, and had ordered the most complex maneuver in military affairs, a four-pronged simultaneous attack,” wrote Custer critic Stephen Ambrose in an almost praiseworthy manner. “It was foolish at best, crazy at worst, but it was magnificent and it was pure Custer.”¹⁵

The Seventh Cavalry caught the Indians sleeping and within an hour the fight was over. A few warriors fired sporadically from hiding along the banks of the river, but there was no organized resistance. Surveying the village, Custer could see over one hundred dead Indians, and his command held some fifty captives and a pony herd of almost nine hundred animals.¹⁶

In context of his lack of a full reconnaissance, Custer’s victory would seem pure luck; however, Edward S. Godfrey, as a general some years later, wrote:

It is a rare occurrence in Indian warfare that gives a commander the opportunity to reconnoiter the enemy’s position in daylight . . . At all events his attack must be made with celerity, and generally without other knowledge of the numbers of the opposing force than that discovered or conjectured while following the trail. The dispositions for the attack may be said to be “made in the dark,” and successful surprise to depend upon luck. If the advance to the attack be made in daylight it is next to impossible that a near approach can be made without discovery. In all our previous experiences, when the immediate presence of the troops was once known to them, the warriors swarmed to the attack, and resorted to all kinds of ruses to mislead the troops, to delay the advance toward their

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 234-40.

¹⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors*, p. 317.

¹⁶ Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, pp. 248-49.

camp or village while the squaws and children secured what personal effects they could, drove off the pony herd, and by flight put themselves beyond danger, and then scattering, made successful pursuit next to impossible.¹⁷

Custer's skill and, to a degree, luck had prevailed.

The only mishap was the loss of Major Joel Elliot's small detachment of nineteen men, who, while in pursuit of fleeing Indians, were cut off and destroyed. Custer sent out patrols, but they could not locate any sign of the soldiers. A large force of Cheyennes and Arapahos from villages further downstream had annihilated the detachment, and by noon, Kiowas had joined the growing war party. As Custer organized his soldiers, these Indians appeared on the hills surrounding the regiment's position.¹⁸ They began firing at Custer's men, which caused him to form the command into a defensive perimeter. Custer considered continuing the offensive, but wisely concluded that he would have faced a static and numerically superior enemy without the benefit of surprise. "To guide my command safely out of the difficulties which seemed just then to beset them," Custer wrote, "I again had recourse to that maxim in war which teaches a commander to do that which his enemy neither expects nor desires him to do."¹⁹ He first ordered his men to destroy the pony herd and burn the lodges and their contents, preventing the future use of the village's extensive winter supplies by the survivors or any other Indians for that matter. To relieve pressure on the command and create an opening for retreat, he chose an audacious move. Forming into columns, Custer marched the Seventh Cavalry downstream toward the Kiowa, Arapaho, and other villages. He hoped the warriors

¹⁷ Edward S. Godfrey in *Century Magazine*, Jan 1892, in W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*, pp. 136-37.

¹⁸ George B. Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, pp. 287-98.

¹⁹ Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, p. 249.

would return to their villages to defend them, which would allow him to change direction and ride back to his wagon train. They did just that without attacking or pursuing him.²⁰

Although he violated a seemingly fundamental military precept by attacking an enemy of unknown strength on a battlefield of unknown terrain, Custer had decisively destroyed a large village. A prudent commander would have conducted a thorough reconnaissance of the village and its proximity before fielding the offensive. But Custer had learned, or perhaps sensed, that the rules of conventional war did not always apply when fighting Indians. Robert Utley best summarized Custer's actions and perceptions on that day.

Custer did not allow prudence to jeopardize surprise. A reconnaissance of Black Kettle's village and its surroundings, especially one wide-ranging enough to have uncovered the downstream villages, would have risked discovery and flight before Custer's companies had reached their assigned attack positions. Better to risk uncertainties of terrain and enemy strength than premature discovery. In Indian warfare, moreover, such uncertainties did not entail as serious risks as in conventional war. Psychological factors figured more importantly and usually outweighed disparity of numbers. If surprise could be achieved, demoralized flight could be expected no matter what the odds, especially if women and children were present. Also, Indians fought as individuals, each pursuing his own aims and instincts, not as organized, disciplined bodies obedient to the orders of a leader. Because of this style of combat, small but disciplined teams of mediocre soldiers could hope, in favorable circumstances, to overwhelm large but undisciplined masses of individually superior Indian warriors.²¹

Custer had, in fact, outnumbered the warriors present in Black Kettle's camp, but the overall encampment of Indians was larger than the one he would attack almost eight years later. Custer judged the length of the entire complex at twelve miles while De Benneville Randolph Keim, a war correspondent for the *New York Herald*, investigated the site after the fight and estimated that the signs of Indian villages stretched for six or

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 254-60.

²¹ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, pp. 76-77.

seven miles along the river.²² Custer had wisely chosen not to continue the fight because he knew there were too many Indians for him to defeat.

Custer's other contacts with Indians reinforced his tactics and opinion of their fighting skills. During the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873, Custer spent more time during the initial weeks of the campaign hunting the region's plentiful game than confronting the numerous Indians he expected to encounter. Eventually on August 4, a small band of warriors charged into the troopers' camp, trying to stampede the cavalry's horses. The unit quickly came alert, repulsing the attempted theft with volley fires. Custer and twenty soldiers pursued the fleeing war party for two miles before they met an immense number of mounted warriors. Custer, now reinforced by a full troop, dismounted his small detachment and held off over 300 Sioux for more than three hours. Recognizing that the Indians had grown weary of their failed attempts to dislodge his command, Custer decided to take the offensive and drive them back. "No sooner did the Indians discern our intentions," Custer wrote in his official report of the engagements during the expedition, "than, despite their superiority in numbers, they cowardly prepared for flight, in which preparation they were greatly hastened when Captain Moylan's squadron charged them and drove them 'pell-mell' for three miles."²³

On August 8, Custer's scouts discovered the trail of a large village leading to the Yellowstone. Custer's trusted Arikara guide Bloody Knife estimated that the village contained between 400 and 500 lodges. If so, it harbored most of Sitting Bull's followers and held as many as 1,000 warriors. Custer promptly set forth to attack it that evening.

²² Keim, *Sheridan's Troopers on the Border*, pp. 148-49.

²³ Custer's battle report, 15 Aug 1873, in Elizabeth B. Custer, "*Boots and Saddles*" or, *Life in Dakota with General Custer*, pp. 237-40.

Marching throughout the night and following day, Custer discovered an abandoned village site just before dark, locating immense quantities of Indian equipment strewn along its withdrawal route. To his disgust, Custer found that the hostiles had crossed to the other side of the river. Anxious to continue the pursuit, Custer and his men spent the next day futilely attempting to cross the same water.

At dawn on the 11th, the Sioux appeared in strength on the opposite bank of the Yellowstone and, to the amazement of the soldiers, began crossing the river below and above the command. Custer reacted swiftly, dispatching detachments to thwart the Indians' moves. Several cavalry charges repelled the attacking hostiles, eventually forcing them back across the river after nearly nine miles of chase. Custer's 450 cavalymen had fought an estimated 800 to 1,000 warriors, losing only four men while inflicting over forty casualties.²⁴

Again Custer had been heavily outnumbered and won. His confidence in his own and his men's ability against the Sioux grew. His one failure to this point had been to ignore a significant difference between the new adversary and the ones he had faced in Kansas and Oklahoma. These Sioux had shown tremendous tenacity, and although they had eventually retreated in the face of cavalry charges, they had proven more daring than others. Likewise, an entire village had readily crossed a river that Custer's men could not ford. Custer, however, did notice that they were well-dressed and well-armed, documenting this in his official report.

Many of the warriors engaged in the fight on both days were dressed in complete suits of the clothes issued at the agencies to Indians. The arms with which they fought us (several of which were captured in the fight) were of the latest improved patterns of breech-loading repeating rifles, and their supply of metallic rifle-cartridges seemed unlimited, as they were

²⁴ Ibid., p. 243-48.

anything but sparing in their use. So amply have they been supplied with breech-loading rifles and ammunition that neither bows nor arrows were employed against us.²⁵

To many this would seem an omen of things to come; however, Custer saw it more as proof that the Sioux, regardless of numbers and arms, could not defeat his Seventh Cavalry.

During the Black Hills Expedition of 1874, the lack of war-like activity by the Sioux reinforced Custer's opinion of them. The first sighting of Indians came when the column saw a small band of twenty or so braves not far away. "They scampered as soon as observed," Custer subsequently wrote. Later, after viewing smoke signals on the surrounding hills, he consulted his scouts, who told him that "the signals may be intended to let the village know where we are, so that they may keep out of our way"²⁶

As the time of the Great Sioux War of 1876 neared, Custer had experienced enough Indian fighting to mold his tactics and philosophy. He, like the majority of officers on the Plains, had firm notions about how to fight Indians and how they would react. He was not particularly concerned with the size of a hostile force in a village because he assumed, based on general experience, that the Indians would flee. "Thus everyone worried not about how to defeat the Indians," noted historian Utley, "but how to catch them before they discovered the soldiers and fled in all directions."²⁷ Custer's fellow commanders in the Dakota column shared the same perception. Colonel Gibbon, writing about his experiences during the Great Sioux War, stated that the object of

²⁵ Ibid., p. 247.

²⁶ Custer to wife, *ibid.*, p. 261.

²⁷ Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, p. 176.

General Terry's plan in June 1876 had been "to prevent the escape of the Indians, which was the idea pervading the minds of us all."²⁸

With this mindset among the officers of the column, it would be absurd to insist that Custer disobeyed Terry's orders by attacking the village too soon. Terry planned to march up the Bighorn with Gibbon's infantry and reach the mouth of the Little Bighorn on June 26. Custer would move up the Rosebud, locate the Indian trail that Reno had found, and follow it, allowing him to meet the hostiles from the opposite direction. Terry's instructions for Custer to constantly search his southern flank placed further emphasis on this obsession to "prevent the escape of the Indians." The orders were completely discretionary and could not have been otherwise because of the uncertainty of the Indians' location. The most damning portion of the orders for any argument that Custer disobeyed them lies in the first paragraph.

It is of course impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement; and were it not possible 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.²⁹

Although for years discarded as fictitious, historians now accept that Custer's black cook Mary Adams accompanied the expedition and trust the 1878 affidavit she produced in regards to Terry's orders to Custer. Her affidavit, as the written order does, negates any opinion that Custer was in the wrong for attacking. After the conference aboard the *Far West*, Terry came to Custer's tent, and Adams overheard part of their

²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹ "Terry's Written Orders to Custer" and in Graham, *Custer Myth*, pp. 132-33.

conversation. “Custer,” said Terry, “I don’t know what to say for the last.” Custer replied, “Say whatever you want to say.” Terry then said, “Use your judgment and do what you think best if you strike the trail. And whatever you do, Custer, hold on to your wounded.”³⁰ It seems likely, in view of this truncated dialogue, that Custer had asked if he should attack if he found the village.

By the time of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Custer had developed a proven tactic for defeating Indians, held a logical perception of their reaction to threat, gained authorization to attack the hostile village, believed the Indians had discovered his column, and was convinced that his foe was fleeing. He chose to pursue them and attack with a tactically sound configuration of his command. The common criticism that he violated a basic principle of war by dividing his command in the face of the enemy seems unwarranted. From what he could see and hear on that fateful day, the Indians were reacting as anticipated: they were running away. He expected the warriors to fight a rearguard action, but if he acted quickly, he might still be able to cut off the village’s withdrawal, surround it, and assault from multiple directions. Custer’s driving thought was to prevent the village from scattering and breaking up, and that he could do only by dividing his command into elements of a reconnaissance by force. “The division of the command was not in itself faulty,” stated Godfrey. “The same tactics were applied at the battle of Washita and were successful.”³¹

The multi-pronged attack had worked before, but was it a rational tactic? In the context of the principles of war, it would appear to have been so. Current United States principles of war contain the following facets: objective, offensive, mass, maneuver,

³⁰ Mary Adams Affidavit, 16 Jan 1878, in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 280.

³¹ Edward S. Godfrey in *Century Magazine*, Jan 1892, *ibid*, p. 147.

economy of force, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity. They are not substitutes for sound, rational thinking and tend to be more descriptive than dogmatic. They can appear somewhat redundant and may conflict with one another under certain conditions; nevertheless, the principles of war provide the essential components of a successful operation.³²

The definition of objective states that a commander should direct every military operation toward “a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.”³³ Custer’s main objective was to find the Sioux village and destroy it. If he could not achieve this, he could at least minimize the Indians’ flight and kill as many warriors as he could. A defeat of the large hostile village would most likely prove decisive in the war against the Sioux. Was that objective attainable? Based on his experiences, Custer believed that it was.

The term offensive refers to military actions that “seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.” The offensive “permits the commander to exercise initiative and impose his will on the enemy, to set the terms and select the place of battle, to exploit enemy weaknesses and rapidly changing situations, and to react to unexpected developments.” Even when an offensive turns to a defense, a commander must still seek ways to gain the initiative and turn the battle.³⁴ Given the circumstances on June 25, Custer had three choices: he could retreat, hunker down and allow the village to escape while possibly subjecting his command to an Indian assault, or he could attack. His understanding of Indian behavior led him to believe that they would run when they discovered him, not

³² John, I. Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine of the Military Art: Past and Present*, pp. 8-11.

³³ FM 100-5, *Operations*, p. 2.4.

³⁴ Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine*, p. 10.

attack him, and there seemed to be no good reason to retreat. Believing the Indians had discovered the regiment, Custer stayed with the offensive to stop their perceived flight and hopefully obtain a decisive victory.

Mass is to “concentrate the effects of combat power at the decisive place and time.”³⁵ The proper execution of this principle, in conjunction with other principles of war, may permit “numerically inferior forces to achieve decisive combat superiority at the point of decision.”³⁶ Although Custer split his forces, he still maintained mass. Critics who charge Custer with having committed a grave tactical blunder miss that essential point. Mass is the massing of effects rather than the concentrating of forces. Custer did, in fact, consolidate the bulk of his combat power, five troops, under his immediate command. This element was the main effort, and Custer attempted to mass its effects at the decisive time and place: the enemy’s flank or rear as Reno charged the southern end of the camp. Had he kept his forces together in a flawed conception of the principle, he would have turned the fight into a frontal attack that, in any circumstances, would have still allowed the majority of the village to escape.

Maneuver is to “place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power.”³⁷ Effective maneuver keeps the enemy “off balance by making them confront new problems and new dangers faster than they can deal with them.”³⁸ Custer attempted to accomplish this by attacking from two directions. Reno’s element would serve as a fixing force, directing and holding the Indians’ attention toward the southern end of the village. Before they could effectively respond to this

³⁵ FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 4.13.

³⁶ Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine*, p. 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁸ FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 4.14.

threat, Custer would strike them on the flank, forcing the enemy to deal with a second, unexpected danger. In relation to modern tactics, Custer's plan was a variant of a "movement to contact" with the purpose of finding, fixing, and finishing the enemy. Because Custer did not know the exact location and size of the enemy when he split his forces, the attack on the village was a "hasty attack," which is a quickly planned operation "without pause in the forward momentum of the force upon initial contact with the enemy."³⁹

Inside this hasty attack, Custer's multi-pronged approach was an attempted envelopment. This form of maneuver requires a holding attack to fix the enemy and a maneuver force, which passes around one of the enemy's flanks and strikes him there or in the rear. The key portion of this maneuver is that the assault element must find or create an assailable flank. The danger of an envelopment, however, is that the flanking force and holding force typically lie beyond the distance of mutual support; hence, a determined enemy can defeat the attackers in detail if one of the forces fails to achieve its task and purpose.⁴⁰ That, in fact, was what happened when Reno failed to hold his position, and Custer, without reinforcements from Benteen, experienced difficulties in quickly reaching an assailable flank.

Economy of force dictates that commanders "employ all combat power available in the most effective way possible; allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts."⁴¹ Benteen and Reno each controlled three troops in supporting roles

³⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 19-20.

⁴¹ FM 100-5, *Operations*, p. 2.5.

while Captain MacDougall's troop provided security for the packtrain. Custer, as the main effort, led five troops. In doing so, he fairly distributed his fighting force.

Unity of command means that all forces work under one responsible commander. The goal is to achieve a unity of effort with "all forces in pursuit of a unified purpose."⁴² Custer was the single commander; however, the actions of his subordinate commanders resulted in a collapse in the unity of effort. Reno failed to hold his position and retreated across the river, and Benteen went even further by not responding to Custer's order to join him quickly in the attack. Instead of a unified effort, Custer and his five troops were left to fight alone—a turn of events not brought about by Custer's actions.

The definition of security states that a unit must "never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected advantage."⁴³ Custer, for the most part, implemented the correct procedures to prevent the Indians from discovering his command or its purpose. The unit posted pickets, moved at night, placed scouts forward, and used small, concealed campfires during hours of limited visibility. The contact with Indians on the morning of June 25 was a chance meeting and carried no weight on the battle except to convince Custer that the command had been discovered. His camp remained safe from harassment and discovery during the campaign.

Surprise calls for a commander to "strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared." During such an action, it is not essential that the attack catch the enemy completely unaware but only that he becomes "aware too late to react effectively." Surprise can come from the attacker's "tempo, size of force, direction

⁴² Ibid., p. 2.5.

⁴³ FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 4.14.

or location of the main effort, and timing.”⁴⁴ Custer thought he had lost this principle, but by all Indian accounts, he achieved it. The attack failed primarily because of the Indians’ ability to react effectively, a factor compounded by Reno’s failed charge. The Indians were not prepared for an attack, but they possessed enough warriors to hold Reno and convince him to retreat. At that point, regardless of how surprised they were, they had the numbers to turn Custer’s charge and surround him in the absence of Benteen’s column.

Simplicity calls for “clear, uncomplicated plans and clear, concise orders to insure thorough understanding.”⁴⁵ Custer did not have time to waste; thus, his plan would fall in place as the situation developed. His orders to Reno and Benteen could not have been more detailed because, although he knew the enemy was ahead, Custer could not give exact directives without seeing the enemy and the terrain. In turn, he placed faith in the abilities of his subordinate commander to react to the unfolding situation. He probably expected a simple attack since he believed that the Indians were running and would react as they usually did. Custer did give one clear, concise, and important order, but Benteen failed to react to it in a prompt manner.

Custer did not violate the principles of war in his actions or planning, but he could not achieve them because of the failures of his subordinate commanders. Likewise, his tactics, up to the point that he sent Reno across the river and then moved his element to the bluffs, were sensible. Only one remaining factor would condemn Custer’s actions at the Little Bighorn as rash, driven by conceit, and tactically inept: his choice to attack a village that was too big for his Seventh Cavalry to take. Custer had known that he faced

⁴⁴ FM 100-5, *Operations*, p. 2.5.

⁴⁵ Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine*, p. 11.

too many Indians and too large a village to continue an offensive down the Washita in 1868. Could he, eight years later, have used bad judgment and ignored common sense?

Estimates of the Little Bighorn village's size and numbers have varied over the years. The first surfaced during Reno's Court of Inquiry in 1879, giving the village and its inhabitants, for the most part, exaggerated spatial dimensions and numbers.

Judgments of Army officers to the length of the encampment ranged from two and a half to over four miles, while the width may have been between 200 yards and one-half mile. Inside this area, some witnesses estimated as many as 1,800 teepees and 500 wickiups while others concluded that the actual count was 1,200 teepees and 400 wickiups. The number of warriors, according to such testimony, might have been 3,000—or three times that many.⁴⁶

One possible explanation for this was that the survivors of the fight increased the size and numbers to create a perception that little could have been done to save Custer and his direct command and to clear themselves of responsibility for the disaster. The survivors may also have been reluctant to explain the disaster without giving the enemy an unfair advantage, hence, placing Custer and his detachment in the same situation with Roland at Ronesvalles, Crockett and Bowie at the Alamo, and Gordon at Khartoum. Many historians have stayed with these numbers and dimensions with some even increasing them to support their theses on the battle.

⁴⁶ W. A. Graham, *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Record of Proceedings*, pp. 15, 34, 75-76, 85, 98-99, 109.

Indian accounts of the village's dimensions varied from one to six miles in length and from one-third to a full mile in width.⁴⁷ As for the totals of village inhabitants and lodges, most Indian testimonies fail to cite numerical estimates. White-Man-Runs-Him, a Crow scout, stated that the village was "the biggest Indian camp I have ever seen,"⁴⁸ while the Blackfeet Sioux Chief Kill Eagle testified that the camp's lodges were "just as thick as they could be put up."⁴⁹ Unlike the soldiers, the Indians had an excuse for disparity and inexactness because of their cultural unfamiliarity with the white man's distance, time, and numbers. During an interview with Sitting Bull in late 1877, an inspector from the North West Mounted Police, James M. Walsh, blatantly told the correspondent not to count on accuracy in "Sitting Bull's or any other Indian's statement in regard to time or numbers."⁵⁰ Of more significance is the hostile remembrance of the village's terrain boundaries.

In interviews, almost a dozen Indians uniformly sketched out the dimensions of the village, placing each separate camp circle in proximity with terrain features. Of these, the best Indian account of the true dimensions is that of Wooden Leg. As a Northern Cheyenne, his village lay at the tail of encampment. He stated that the Cheyenne camp was just downstream and to the west of Medicine Tail Coulee. On the other end of the camp were the Hunkpapas, lying near Shoulder Blade Creek and just northeast of present-day Garryowen, Montana, with the remaining camps between them.⁵¹ Accounts from Reno's men also placed the Hunkpapas' teepees here.

⁴⁷ Orin G. Libby, *The Arikara Narrative of Custer's Campaign and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, pp. 82, 84; Graham, *Custer Myth*, pp. 55, 69, 77, 79; Greg F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ White-Man-Runs-Him to Colonel Tim McCoy, 1919, in Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ Kill Eagle in *New York Herald*, 6 Oct 1876, *ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Graham, *Custer Myth*, p. 72.

⁵¹ Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, pp. 206-9.

Historian Greg F. Michno used these boundaries to structure the village mathematically, which significantly reduced its perceived size. Using these confines, the camp was only one and one-half mile in length, an area containing approximately 877 acres. Researching the configuration of camps, he found that, when located near water, they conformed to the course of the stream. His scrutiny of pictures of Indian villages revealed that inhabitants clustered their lodges at certain points for reasons of security, geography, and family ties, with the typical cluster containing between twelve and twenty teepees per acre. The normal family teepee held five people and ranged in width from eighteen to twenty-two feet, covering a space of almost forty-eight square yards. With an acre containing 4,840 square yards, one hundred teepees could fit inside the area, but such a concentration would have been ridiculous.⁵²

Soldiers' estimates of the village ranged from 1,200 to 1,800 lodges and from two and a half to almost four miles in length with a width ranging from 200 yards to a half mile in some places. To place 1,800 teepees in an area more than two miles long and a quarter-mile wide (roughly 440 yards) would require only five teepees per acre, and to place 1,200 in that area would require only three per acre. Any fewer teepees per acre would not have constituted a village, and Custer more than likely would have continued searching for the great camp that he knew existed somewhere. Kill Eagle said the teepees were "just as thick as they could be put up," and there is no reason to believe that this camp was uncommonly spread out. "The camp ran one and one-half miles along the river and three hundred yards back from it," Michno wrote. "The area covered by the main bulk of the village on 25 June amounted to only one-quarter square mile."⁵³ As to

⁵² Michno, *Lakota Noon*, pp. 13-17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the number of warriors inside this condensed village, historian Edgar I. Stewart offers the best suggestion. “While most of the teepees were undoubtedly family, rather than war, lodges,” he concluded, “the number of wickiups was unusually large, and these were occupied almost exclusively by fighting men.”⁵⁴ This reasoning would give an added deception to Custer or anyone viewing the village as to the true numbers inside.

In appearance, this was a large village, but not as large as the one on the Washita and not much larger than the Sitting Bull camp that Custer had attempted to attack in 1873. Sitting Bull’s Hunkpapa on the Little Bighorn would have been in the same position as Black Kettle’s Southern Cheyenne. At the Washita, Custer had hit the Cheyenne village and feinted toward the rest because he knew that a series of camps covering at least six miles were too much to attack. However, a camp consolidated along a stretch of one and one-half miles was well within Custer’s ability to defeat. The true logic of the matter is that Custer was outnumbered by Indians who were not going to run, but the village did not look to contain that many. When he crested the bluffs and called for Benteen, he was looking at a village that he believed he could take; thus, instead of retreating or reinforcing Reno, he prepared to envelope the entire complex.

In this final fight, Custer along with his two brothers, Tom and Boston, a brother-in-law Captain James Calhoun, a nephew Autie Reed, and numerous men, who had loyally served with the Boy General since the Civil War, fought to their deaths on a hill later named after him. He had led them there, misguided by experience and perceptions.

⁵⁴ Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*, p. 312.

CHAPTER 4
IN RETROSPECT

If Custer was justified in his actions and his choice to attack the village, what decisions and events led to the destruction of his five troops? Could the outcome have been altered or was Custer's defeat set in stone from the beginning?

Custer's decisions before the regiment departed from the Yellowstone base camp on June 22 provide part of the answer. He first declined the attachment of Major Brisbin's battalion and then refused the added firepower of Colonel Gibbon's Gatling guns. Custer rejected the additional soldiers, as he later explained to his officers, because he was confident that the "7th Cavalry could whip any force that would be able to combine against it."¹ The addition of over one hundred soldiers, however, would have strengthened Reno and possibly permitted his force to overpower the Indians' initial stand or it might have proven to be the combat power needed to break through the resistance at Medicine Tail Coulee and charge into the flank or rear of the camp. The question of troop strength—or firepower—underlies the common argument that Custer could have accomplished his mission by keeping his forces together. Had he not sent Benteen on a reconnaissance mission to the left, these troops could have served in the same capacity as Brisbin's proposed battalion. Custer's decision to send Benteen to the left, however, was valid.

The presence of a Gatling gun battery definitely would have changed the outcome of the fight. If attached to Reno's column, the guns likely would have destroyed the bulk of warriors on the valley floor and left Custer with little opposition as he charged down

¹ W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*, p. 134.

Medicine Tail Coulee or even further downstream. But, the Battle of the Little Bighorn would not have taken place at its time or location had Custer chosen to drag the battery along. Four *condemned* horses hauled the weapon systems, and they could not have kept up with the column during long, fast marches, nor could they have crossed rough ground without help. Had Custer chosen to slow his column's pace to match that of the battery, he would not have reached the battlefield on June 25.² The benefit would have been that a fight at a later time would have probably involved Gibbon's force as it approached from the opposite end of the river valley. Nonetheless, Custer's choice not to take the weapon system reflected rational thinking. Invented in 1861 and with few improvements since its initial production, the guns frequently malfunctioned and stood so high that their firers were easy targets for the enemy.³ As proof of the unsuitability of the Gatlings for the rough terrain of the region, Gibbon, with some in tow, experienced numerous problems as the weary horses fell back from his own slow-moving main body, which, unlike Custer's, contained foot soldiers. His column spent hours retrieving the Gatlings and, at times, had to lower the cumbersome firearms down steep hills by hand and rope.⁴ A reversal of Custer's earlier decisions thus possibly could have changed the face of the battle or caused it to occur at a different time and place under more favorable conditions. But, what really went wrong at the Little Bighorn stemmed from the decision to attack on June 25, a decision based on the belief that the hostiles had discovered the column.

What could have happened if Custer stuck with his original plan to attack on the morning of the 26th? A delay in the attack would have given him time to conduct a

² Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, p. 246.

³ Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and the Little Bighorn*, pp. 257-58.

⁴ Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899*, p. 16.

proper reconnaissance. If the Indians remained in position, his reconnaissance would have revealed that no reason existed for sending Benteen to the left, which would have given added combat power to his other elements if he chose the same direction of attack. The reconnaissance might have convinced him also that the village, in fact, contained too many Indians for him to defeat. He could have then dispatched a messenger to Terry and Gibbon, proposing a coordinated advance on the morning of June 26. The operation might still have been a surprise, but it is more likely that the Indians encountered on the morning of the 25th would have eventually alerted the whole village by that afternoon. Thus, Custer then would have faced either an attack by the hostiles or watched as they broke camp and fled in the opposite direction.

In a perfect scenario, the Indians would have remained unaware of Custer's presence, and his messenger would have reached Terry and Gibbon on the evening of June 25. Gibbon would have continued his march from the opposite direction, but at a quickened pace, leaving the Gatlings behind. He then would have dispatched Brisbin's cavalry forward, providing another prong of attack and blocking the withdrawal route of the Indians. At dawn on the 26th, Custer's regiment would have struck the southern and eastern portion of the village while Brisbin stormed the northern. The fighting still would have been intense, but as the afternoon approached, Gibbon's infantry would have appeared from the north, sealing the Indians' fate.

This, of course, is all speculation, so the real hope of a Seventh Cavalry victory at the Little Bighorn lies in the actual circumstances and decisions made by Custer and his subordinate commanders during the attack. Four specific events were critical: Custer's

move to the bluffs, Reno's failure to charge, Reno's withdrawal, and Benteen's slow reaction to Custer's orders.

After Reno departed, Custer moved to the right to strengthen the reconnaissance and hit the Indians from a different direction. Had he held at the river and reinforced Reno, the cavalry might have broken through the Indians' initial resistance and charged into the Hunkpapa camp or formed a strong skirmish line in the timber where Reno actually held for a while. Custer then would have needed Benteen to execute a flanking movement to bring success. During the actual fight, however, Benteen took over an hour to reach Reno's defensive position on the opposite side of the river, and he would have arrived too late to deliver a decisive blow. A portion of the village would have fallen to Custer, but the Indians would have faced resistance on only one front. As their warriors held off the cavalry, the remaining inhabitants would have broken camp and scattered. The only way for Custer to defeat the entire village was to surround it, and that could only come by a second attack from the bluffs overlooking the river.

Reno's forming of a skirmish line and subsequent failure to hold it freed numerous Indians to concentrate on Custer. Had he continued to fight in the valley, there would not have been as much pressure on his commander, and Custer might have been able to maneuver into a decisive location to cross the river and hit the flank or rear of the village. Moreover, had Reno remained in the valley, Benteen likely would have moved to Custer instead of halting, and the two elements together could have executed an effective charge against the village.

Reno's decision to abandon his position outside the village met mixed views by both his soldiers and opponents. Indian accounts cite Reno's failed actions as the

decisive piece to their victory. He had not suffered heavy casualties and was within 200 yards of the Hunkpapa camp when he chose to withdraw his command. The disorganized flight from the valley cost him heavy casualties and released Gall's warriors to follow Custer and hit the flank held by Calhoun and Keogh, providing one side of the Indians' encirclement. The retreat also boosted the morale of the Indians.

When Benteen moved back to the main trail after his reconnaissance, he was only thirty minutes behind the rest of the command. His pace continued to slacken, and when he received Martin's message from Custer, he did little to speed up his movement. Custer had expected him to move swiftly and had positioned companies to protect his advance. Had Benteen moved at a gallop he could have met Custer at Medicine Tail Coulee within fifteen minutes. He would have then served as a diversion that would have allowed Custer a chance to extricate his column, or he could have possibly been the decisive factor in victory because the Indians moving up the coulee would have been caught between his forces and Custer's. On the other hand, he and his men might have died as Custer's did, but that would not have been likely. Reno was equally as guilty of not responding to Custer's order to Benteen because he knew of it and did nothing. Only one commander, Captain Weir, after ignoring Reno's order not to leave the position, took his company to reinforce Custer, but by the time he departed, most of Custer's men were dead and the Indians, now turning their attention again to Reno, forced the company back to the hill. In theory, then, the officers of the Seventh Cavalry could have altered the battle's events. They might not have brought absolute success, but the fight could have certainly gone differently.

To prove that Custer could have achieved a decisive victory is impossible, but one conclusion stands clear: he does not deserve the criticism directed at him by many historians for his actions at the Little Bighorn. Given his prior experiences, the information and perceptions that he had at every decisional juncture, and the actions he expected from his subordinate commanders, it is difficult to determine what he should have done differently. The Indians were strong that day, and they did not act in the manner that Custer, or many other officers, expected. In all, Custer died because of peculiar circumstances rather than poor judgment and tactics. Perhaps, the telling circumstance for Custer and his men was that these Indians were confident. They were aware of their strength in numbers, trusted their leaders, and had proven just a week earlier that they could stand and defeat the white man's cavalry. Custer attacked them, believing he could win. All of his prior experiences pointed to certain victory, and therein lay the main reason for his tragic end.

Custer loved war and the rewards he reaped from being good at leading men in combat. "In years long numbered with the past, when I was merging upon manhood my every thought was ambitious—not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great," he noted in 1867. "I desired to link my name with acts and men, and in such a manner as to be a mark of honor, not only to the present but to future generations."⁵ He was not a perfect officer nor was he the best Indian fighter ever on the Plains, but on that summer day in 1876, he made a sound military decision. In doing so, he tragically fulfilled his lifelong ambition.

⁵ Quoted in Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Experience*, pp. 211-12.

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