

# Historical Perspective and Heroes: The Battle at Little Bighorn

Lesson Design by: Jim Wheeler, Chillicothe High School, Grade 11 U.S. History  
July 2005

## Teaching Traditional American History Program

Funded by U.S. Department of Education

Mike Lair, Project Director

<http://www.chillhistoryproject.com/>

Lesson Overview: In this lesson, students will explore the phenomenon of historical perspective by examining different accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Students will examine how the views differed not only along cultural lines but also with the passage of time.

Objectives: After completing this lesson the student will be able to:

- Describe the events surrounding the Battle of the Little Bighorn.
- Analyze differences in historical viewpoints.
- Explain how perspectives change over time.

*MO GLE 9-12 US History, 2a, A, D, E; 5, E.*

### Materials:

- This excellent video from PBS' American Experience series: [Last Stand at Little Big Horn](#). Available in VHS or DVD format at [www.shop.wgbh.org](http://www.shop.wgbh.org) or by calling 1-800-949-8670.
- Copies of the viewing questions for the video (provided in Handout 1).
- Accounts of the Battle of Little Bighorn: one from an Army scout and one from a Lakota Sioux who had been involved in the battle (provided in Handout 2).
- Venn Diagrams for student use

Class Time: Approximately 2-3 50-minute class periods. The video is approximately 55 minutes without the end credits. Lesson length can be adjusted by assigning the exercises to be done outside class time as homework.

### Teacher Input:

1) Begin by asking each student to write down on paper the name of a person he/she believes is a hero, and to write at least one reason why. Chances are

that few or none of the student responses will match. Point out that hero status is a matter of perspective, and that for generations of white Americans one common hero figure was George Armstrong Custer.

2) Distribute Handout 1. The items all correspond with the video [Last Stand at Little Big Horn](#). Some items are to be addressed during the viewing of the video, and some are for reflection after viewing.

3) Discuss students answers in class.

4) Distribute Handout 2. Assign the students to read the accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Using the Venn Diagram as a graphic organizer, have the students document the similarities and differences between these two accounts.

#### Questions for review:

- Why do you think that the Battle of Little Bighorn still stirs emotional responses 125 years later?
- Why do you think the federal government changed the name of the monument from the Custer Battlefield to the Little Bighorn Battlefield?
- How have American attitudes toward General Custer changed in the 125 years since his "Last Stand"? Can you think of other figures in American history that have traveled along similar paths? If so, who?

Assessment: Students should be evaluated based on participation in class discussion and performance in individual and/or group work.

#### Extension:

- Exceptional or motivated students could research the battlefield or the progression of the battle itself to create a 3-D mockup.
- For a culture examination, students could study the relationships between the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Crow tribes and how the relationships have changed since the pre-Civil War period.

#### References:

- For information about the Little Bighorn Battlefield, go to its National Park Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/libi/index.htm>
- This site has excellent campaign maps of the LBH battle area: [NPS Historical Handbook: Custer Battlefield \(Little Bighorn\)](#)
- The Crazy Horse Monument is a 100% privately-funded venture. Its website is <http://www.crazyhorse.org/>

#### **Handout 1**

## Viewing and Reflection Questions for *Last Stand at Little Big Horn*

**Directions:** answer the following items while you watch the video.

1. On what date did the Battle of the Little Bighorn occur? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How did the Lakota people get control of the northern plains? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. In what year did the last survivor of the Custer expedition die? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Why was Custer called "The Boy General?" \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What started a rush of whites into the Lakota territory? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What Lakota leader was the first to violently resist emigration along the Bozeman Trail? \_\_\_\_\_
7. According to Johnson Holy Rock, what legendary power did Crazy Horse have? \_\_\_\_\_
8. After the economic crisis of 1873, who demanded that all Indians be removed to reservations? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What was the real purpose of Custer's 1873 expedition into the Black Hills? \_\_\_\_\_
10. During his 1876 sundance, the Lakota holy man Sitting Bull had an important vision. Describe what he saw. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. What fateful decision did Custer make upon reaching the Little Bighorn valley? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Most of Custer's scouts were of the \_\_\_\_\_ tribe, a long-time enemy of the Lakota.
13. How many men died under Custer's direct command? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Briefly describe how Crazy Horse was killed. \_\_\_\_\_

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15. Name a person who helped create Custer's image as a hero after his death:

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**Directions:** write your answers to the following items on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Describe the attitude of whites toward Indians during Custer's lifetime.
2. What was the reaction of the United States government to the defeat of Custer at Little Bighorn?
3. Why have so many white Americans seen Custer as a hero?
4. Is Custer considered a hero today? Why or why not?
5. Of all the other people who took part in the battle, who else might be considered a hero?
6. Today there is a monument under construction in the Black Hills to Crazy Horse. When complete, it will be the largest stone carving in the world. Would Crazy Horse have been considered a worthy subject of a monument in his own day? How would you explain the purpose of the monument to a 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. cavalryman?



Crazy Horse Monument, Black Hills, Sout Dakota

## Two Views of The Battle of the Little Bighorn, 1876

### Carnage at the Little Bighorn (account written by an army scout)

<http://www.ibiscom.com/custer.htm>

George Herendon served as a scout for the Seventh Cavalry - a civilian under contract with the army and attached to Major Reno's command. Herendon charged across the Little Bighorn River with Reno as the soldiers met an overwhelming force of Sioux streaming from their encampment. After the battle, Herendon told his story to a reporter from the New York Herald:

"Reno took a steady gallop down the creek bottom three miles where it emptied into the Little Horn, and found a natural ford across the Little Horn River. He started to cross, when the scouts came back and called out to him to hold on, that the Sioux were coming in large numbers to meet him. He crossed over, however, formed his companies on the prairie in line of battle, and moved forward at a trot but soon took a gallop.

"The Valley was about three fourth of a mile wide, on the left a line of low, round hills, and on the right the river bottom covered with a growth of cottonwood trees and bushes. After scattering shots were fired from the hills and a few from the river bottom and Reno's skirmishers returned the shots.

"He advanced about a mile from the ford to a line of timber on the right and dismounted his men to fight on foot. The horses were sent into the timber, and the men forward on the prairie and advanced toward the Indians. The Indians, mounted on ponies, came across the prairie and opened a heavy fire on the soldiers. After skirmishing for a few minutes Reno fell back to his horses in the timber. The Indians moved to his left and rear, evidently with the intention of cutting him off from the ford.

"Reno ordered his men to mount and move through the timber, but as his men got into the saddle the Sioux, who had advanced in the timber, fired at close range and killed one soldier. Colonel Reno then commanded the men to dismount, and they did so, but he soon ordered them to mount again, and moved out on to the open prairie.

"The command headed for the ford, pressed closely by Indians in large numbers, and at every moment the rate of speed was increased, until it became a dead run for the ford. The Sioux, mounted on their swift ponies, dashed up by the side of the soldiers and fired at them, killing both men and horses. Little resistance was offered, and it was complete rout to the ford. I did not see the men at the ford, and do not know what took place further than a good many were killed when the command left the timber.

"Just as I got out, my horse stumbled and fell and I was dismounted, the horse running away after Reno's command. I saw several soldiers who were dismounted, their horses having been killed or run away. There were also some soldiers mounted who had remained behind, I should think in all as many as thirteen soldiers, and seeing no chance of getting away, I called on them to come into the timber and we would stand off the Indians.

"Three of the soldiers were wounded, and two of them so badly they could not use their arms. The soldiers wanted to go out, but I said no, we can't get to the ford, and besides, we have wounded men and must stand by them. The soldiers still wanted to go, but I told them I was an old frontiersman, understood the Indians, and if they would do as I said I would get them out of the scrape which was no worse than scrapes I had been in before. About half of the men were mounted, and they wanted to keep their horses with them, but I told them to let the horses go and fight on foot.

"We stayed in the bush about three hours, and I could hear heavy firing below in the river, apparently about two miles distant. I did not know who it was, but knew the Indians were fighting some of our men, and learned afterward it was Custer's command. Nearly all the Indians in the upper part of the valley drew off down the river, and the fight with Custer lasted about one hour, when the heavy firing ceased. When the shooting below began to die away I said to the boys 'come, now is the time to get out.' Most of them did not go, but waited for night. I told them the Indians would come back and we had better be off at once. Eleven of the thirteen said they would go, but two stayed behind.

"I deployed the men as skirmishers and we moved forward on foot toward the river. When we had got nearly to the river we met five Indians on ponies, and they fired on us. I returned the fire and the Indians broke and we then forded the river, the water being heart deep. We finally got over, wounded men and all, and headed for Reno's command which I could see drawn up on the bluffs along the river about a mile off. We reached Reno in safety.

"We had not been with Reno more than fifteen minutes when I saw the Indians coming up the valley from Custer's fight. Reno was then moving his whole command down the ridge toward Custer. The Indians crossed the river below Reno and swarmed up the bluff on all sides. After skirmishing with them Reno went back to his old position which was on one of the highest fronts along the bluffs. It was now about five o'clock, and the fight lasted until it was too dark to see to shoot.

"As soon as it was dark Reno took the packs and saddles off the mules and horses and made breast works of them. He also dragged the dead horses and mules on the line and sheltered the men behind them. Some of the men dug rifle pits with their butcher knives and all slept on their arms.

"At the peep of day the Indians opened a heavy fire and a desperate fight ensued, lasting until 10 o'clock. The Indians charged our position three or four times, coming up close enough to hit our men with stones, which they threw by hand. Captain Benteen saw a large mass of Indians gathered on his front to charge, and ordered his men to charge on foot and scatter them.

"Benteen led the charge and was upon the Indians before they knew what they were about and killed a great many. They were evidently much surprised at this offensive movement, and I think in desperate fighting Benteen is one of the bravest men I ever saw in a fight. All the time he was going about through the bullets, encouraging the soldiers to stand up to their work and not let the Indians whip them; he went among the horses and pack mules and drove out the men who were skulking there, compelling them to go into the line and do their duty. He never sheltered his own person once during the battle, and I do not see how he escaped being killed. The desperate charging and fighting was over at about one o'clock, but firing was kept up on both sides until late in the afternoon."

**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**

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/six/bighorn.htm>

"Five springs ago I, with many Sioux Indians, took down and packed up our tipis and moved from Cheyenne river to the Rosebud river, where we camped a few days; then took down and packed up our lodges and moved to the Little Bighorn river and pitched our lodges with the large camp of Sioux.

"The Sioux were camped on the Little Bighorn river as follows: The lodges of the Uncpapas were pitched highest up the river under a bluff. The Santee lodges were pitched next. The Oglala's lodges were pitched next. The Brule lodges were pitched next. The Minneconjou lodges were pitched next. The Sans Arcs' lodges were pitched next. The Blackfeet lodges were pitched next. The Cheyenne lodges were pitched next. A few Arikara Indians were among the Sioux (being without lodges of their own). Two-Kettles, among the other Sioux (without lodges).

"I was a Sioux chief in the council lodge. My lodge was pitched in the center of the camp. The day of the attack I and four women were a short distance from the camp digging wild turnips. Suddenly one of the women attracted my attention to a cloud of dust rising a short distance from camp. I soon saw that the soldiers were charging the camp. To the camp I and the women ran. When I arrived a person told me to hurry to the council lodge. The soldiers charged so quickly we

could not talk (council). We came out of the council lodge and talked in all directions. The Sioux mount horses, take guns, and go fight the soldiers. Women and children mount horses and go, meaning to get out of the way.

“Among the soldiers was an officer who rode a horse with four white feet. [This officer was evidently Capt. French, Seventh Cavalry.] The Sioux have for a long time fought many brave men of different people, but the Sioux say this officer was the bravest man they had ever fought. I don't know whether this was Gen. Custer or not. Many of the Sioux men that I hear talking tell me it was. I saw this officer in the fight many times, but did not see his body. It has been told me that he was killed by a Santee Indian, who took his horse. This officer wore a large-brimmed hat and a deerskin coat. This officer saved the lives of many soldiers by turning his horse and covering the retreat. Sioux say this officer was the bravest man they ever fought. I saw two officers looking alike, both having long yellowish hair.

“Before the attack the Sioux were camped on the Rosebud river. Sioux moved down a river running into the Little Bighorn river, crossed the Little Bighorn river, and camped on its west bank.

“This day [day of attack] a Sioux man started to go to Red Cloud agency, but when he had gone a short distance from camp he saw a cloud of dust rising and turned back and said he thought a herd of buffalo was coming near the village.

The day was hot. In a short time the soldiers charged the camp. [This was Maj. Reno's battalion of the Seventh Cavalry.] The soldiers came on the trail made by the Sioux camp in moving, and crossed the Little Bighorn river above where the Sioux crossed, and attacked the lodges of the Uncpapas, farthest up the river. The women and children ran down the Little Bighorn river a short distance into a ravine. The soldiers set fire to the lodges. All the Sioux now charged the soldiers and drove them in confusion across the Little Bighorn river, which was very rapid, and several soldiers were drowned in it. On a hill the soldiers stopped and the Sioux surrounded them. A Sioux man came and said that a different party of Soldiers had all the women and children prisoners. Like a whirlwind the word went around, and the Sioux all heard it and left the soldiers on the hill and went quickly to save the women and children.

“From the hill that the soldiers were on to the place where the different soldiers [by this term Red-Horse always means the battalion immediately commanded by General Custer, his mode of distinction being that they were a different body from that first encountered] were seen was level ground with the exception of a creek. Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill [i.e., Reno's battalion] would charge them in rear, but when they did not the Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill were out of cartridges. As soon as we had killed all the different soldiers the Sioux all went back to kill the soldiers on the hill. All the Sioux watched around the hill on which were the soldiers until a Sioux man came and said many walking soldiers were

coming near. The coming of the walking soldiers was the saving of the soldiers on the hill. Sioux can not fight the walking soldiers [infantry], being afraid of them, so the Sioux hurriedly left.

“The soldiers charged the Sioux camp about noon. The soldiers were divided, one party charging right into the camp. After driving these soldiers across the river, the Sioux charged the different soldiers [i.e., Custer's] below, and drive them in confusion; these soldiers became foolish, many throwing away their guns and raising their hands, saying, ‘Sioux, pity us; take us prisoners.’ The Sioux did not take a single soldier prisoner, but killed all of them; none were left alive for even a few minutes. These different soldiers discharged their guns but little. I took a gun and two belts off two dead soldiers; out of one belt two cartridges were gone, out of the other five.

“The Sioux took the guns and cartridges off the dead soldiers and went to the hill on which the soldiers were, surrounded and fought them with the guns and cartridges of the dead soldiers. Had the soldiers not divided I think they would have killed many Sioux. The different soldiers [i.e., Custer's battalion] that the Sioux killed made five brave stands. Once the Sioux charged right in the midst of the different soldiers and scattered them all, fighting among the soldiers hand to hand.

“One band of soldiers was in rear of the Sioux. When this band of soldiers charged, the Sioux fell back, and the Sioux and the soldiers stood facing each other. Then all the Sioux became brave and charged the soldiers. The Sioux went but a short distance before they separated and surrounded the soldiers. I could see the officers riding in front of the soldiers and hear them shooting. Now the Sioux had many killed. The soldiers killed 136 and wounded 160 Sioux. The Sioux killed all these different soldiers in the ravine.

“The soldiers charged the Sioux camp farthest up the river. A short time after the different soldiers charged the village below. While the different soldiers and Sioux were fighting together the Sioux chief said, "Sioux men, go watch soldiers on the hill and prevent their joining the different soldiers." The Sioux men took the clothing off the dead and dressed themselves in it. Among the soldiers were white men who were not soldiers. The Sioux dressed in the soldiers' and white men's clothing fought the soldiers on the hill.

“The banks of the Little Bighorn river were high, and the Sioux killed many of the soldiers while crossing. The soldiers on the hill dug up the ground [i.e., made earth-works], and the soldiers and Sioux fought at long range, sometimes the Sioux charging close up. The fight continued at long range until a Sioux man saw the walking soldiers coming. When the walking soldiers came near the Sioux became afraid and ran away.

Answer key to the viewing questions in Handout 1:

1. June 26, 1876
2. The Lakota drove out the other tribes living there.
3. 1950
4. Custer achieved the rank of general at the young age of 23.
5. Discovery of gold
6. Red Cloud
7. Bullets could not harm him.
8. Railroad company owners
9. To find gold
10. Many dead soldiers falling into the Lakota camp
11. To attack rather than wait for the other two columns of troops to arrive
12. Crow
13. 210
14. He was stabbed in the back while trying to escape from the soldiers.
15. "Buffalo Bill" Cody; Mrs. Elizabeth Custer