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THE DEFEAT OF THE 7TH CAVALRY: IMPACT ON THE NATION

BY

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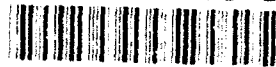
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THE DEFEAT OF THE 7TH CAVALRY: IMPACT ON THE NATION

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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From its very infancy, America struggled to form and execute a comprehensive policy to deal with the Indians. However, as the nation grew, management of Indian affairs was often confused, haphazard, and inconsistent. Strategies of treaty-making, land purchases, assimilation of the tribes into "civilized society", and outright removal of the Indians from their traditional lands all competed with each other. The Civil War provided only a brief change of focus away from the Indian problem, and as the country set about its post-war Reconstruction, attention again turned to Indian affairs. By the 1870's the nation was divided into two basic philosophies on the best way to resolve the issue. The population on the frontier favored a heavy-handed military approach, while eastern society leaned toward a softer program of preparing the Indians for integration into "civilization." As the debate continued and the Indian wars became more intense, George Armstrong Custer led his Regiment in its ill-fated attack against a Sioux encampment. This study examines the impact of that event on the nation, its policy towards the Indians, on the Army itself, as well as the politics during the election year of 1876. Additionally, the study examines the media's role and its influence on the American people. It is an attempt to show the major impact that a single event can have on an entire nation.

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INTRODUCTION

From the very moment the first European explorers set foot on the eastern coast of the new world, their intention was expansion. This obsession to grow and to exploit the resources of the New World faced a myriad of wilderness obstacles. But the most complex and enduring of these problems was the presence of the then current landowners, the American Indians.

The debate on how to resolve the Indian problem would continue throughout the colonial era and, in the wake of the Civil War, the country was still divided on which road to take towards a final Indian "solution". How should the last obstacle to the settlement of the nation be removed? Should native Americans be amicably assimilated into the new society, or simply subjugated by use of brute force? Even after two centuries of attempting to resolve the problem by dubious policies, the bureaucrats in Washington were still divided over which agency would oversee the whole process and what policies would resolve the problem.

The nation's focus on westward expansion was interrupted in the mid 19th century by the American Civil War. Once it was concluded, the country set about its Reconstruction, and the focus again turned to the economic growth and settlement of the ever shrinking American west. Once again, the problem of the Indians would have to be

solved. What ensued, of course, was more debate, more policy, and increased military involvement. The Indian Wars were again in full swing.

In the midst of this reconstruction period an engagement occurred that has become more famous to Americans, perhaps, than any other single battle with the Indians in the country's history. On a Montana day in June, 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer lost his entire force while attacking a large Indian encampment. The worst military defeat for the United States Army in the Indian campaigns had occurred and would become a legend.

Countless volumes have been written about the decimation of Custer's 7th U.S. Cavalry. The tactical errors have all been dissected, each maneuver examined in exhaustive detail, and Custer's motives second guessed. But, beyond the battle itself, what exactly did the defeat at Bighorn mean? What impact did this squadron-size massacre have at the national level -- on the national plan for western development?

This study is designed to show the impact of the Little Bighorn on the nation's policy toward the Indians. It will first provide the reader with a brief overview of the development of U.S. policy toward the Indians and conclude with an analysis of how Little Bighorn resulted in an acceleration of the process to settle, once and for all, the "Indian problem".

EARLY INDIAN POLICY

Long before declaring their independence, it was clear to early colonists that their thirst for economic growth and free land to feed this growth would require them to drive west and south. It was also immediately evident that any expansion plan would necessitate addressing the issue of what to do with the American Indians, the competitor claimants to the land.

After the successful conclusion of the American Revolution, the government of the new nation quickly realized that the Indian issue was now their's. Fearing that western territories were in danger of being controlled by Spain in the southwest and by Great Britain in the northwest, and the French still contenders in Louisiana, the ever present and pressing Indian problem required prompt consideration. After all, a sound and executable policy was necessary for the final elimination of foreign control over the native Americans.¹

Attempts to formalize an Indian policy were made relatively early. With the Act of July 12, 1775, the Continental Congress created three administrative Indian departments -- northern, middle, and southern to manage Indian affairs within the geographical boundaries of each department. Commissioners were chartered to interface with the tribes, preserve peace and friendship with them, and to

arrest British agents attempting to incite the Indians to hostilities against the colonies. Even before this, the Congress had already decided that should the British ally with the Indians, the Continental Congress would enter into formal alliances with as many tribes as possible in order to oppose British troops and their Indian allies.² So, it appears that the nation's earliest attempts at formal Indian policy were primarily driven by security interests; specifically, security against foreign incursions.

From the beginning, policies dealing with Indian affairs were less than consistent and coordinated, a trend that would continue for the next century and a half. The states, for example, could not agree as to who should regulate Indian affairs, the central government of the Continental Congress or the individual states themselves. Arguments of this type were intense in the early days of the nation as the government struggled to determine how much control states would surrender to the Congress. Eventually, the Articles of the Continental Congress gave the central government the exclusive power to regulate trade and manage the affairs of the Indians provided that the "legislative right of any State, within its own limits, be not infringed or violated."³ So, although Congress was given sole and exclusive power to enter into treaties and alliances, the clause pertaining to Indian affairs provided a loophole for the states to negotiate treaties with the tribes. In effect,

the Indians would no longer be universally viewed as a people with the same nation-state status as other foreign governments. Friction between the states and the National Congress naturally resulted.

Although trading opportunity was a key reason for a sound government policy for Indian affairs, the truly central theme was land. This theme would remain the critical issue throughout the nation's expansion period.

The earliest settlers, the French, British, and Dutch, pursued policies that favored friendly relations with the tribes accompanied by negotiations to purchase land. However by the late 1600's it became evident that as the colonies continued to grow, the chances of persuading the tribes to relinquish more land would become increasingly difficult. Organized conflict was inevitable. Attempting to take possession of the Mohawk River country by planting brass plates as claim markers, the French had been driven back to Canada by Mohawk warriors.⁴ Undaunted, the French as well as the other colonists, continued to secure land from the Indians through any means possible including fraud, deceit, and occasionally force. And although the King of England attempted to intercede on behalf of fair treatment for Indians, it was difficult to stop the land hungry settlers with the available military and governmental resources.

Congress' management of Indian affairs under the Articles was confused, haphazard, and still often in conflict with the states. In fact, there existed fourteen different policies, each one competing with the others. Indian relations were managed by a special Congressional Committee that, although it made a commendable effort, failed to produce a consistent, effective policy. A stronger hand was needed.

In 1786 the Congress made the Secretary of War the unquestionable director of Indian affairs. This Act, empowering the War Department with responsibility for the Indians, was passed within ten months of the convening of the Constitutional Convention, highlighting the priority the Congress placed on the Indian affairs.⁵ The foundation for future policy was laid.

Nothing was more confusing than the formulation of Indian policy during this period. A wide myriad of factors, including concern for the Indian's fair treatment, entered into the fundamental decisions that often produced inconclusive and ineffective results.

LAND: TURN OF THE CENTURY ISSUE

As the year 1790 arrived, the principal factor affecting Indian relations was the nature of the Indian title to the soil. It is important to keep in mind that the

Indian right to the land was not a new concept promoted by the civil rights interest groups of the day. Quite the contrary, it had always been one of the foundation premises for Indian relations.

In the 1600's Great Britain recognized the rights of the Indians to occupy their lands until they had surrendered them by treaty or conquest. The United States subsequently inherited that policy and followed it until 1873.⁶ The strategy therefore, evolved into a policy of treaties and purchases. It did not begin as a strategy of simple armed invasion to conquer a new territory.

Formally the government respected the Indians' right of occupancy, and Indian lands were not open to white settlement until Indian title was extinguished. The process of "extinguishing" the Indian's title to the land increasingly involved large sums of money. Precedent had long been set by the French and the British -- there were no treaties without money and gifts.⁷

But treaties require negotiations. Negotiations usually result in delays, and the land-hungry frontier settlers could not wait. By the turn of the century, many white settlers had moved into Indian territories before any treaties were signed and boundaries surveyed. In fact, some states, North Carolina for example, had sold large portions of Indian land to Revolutionary War soldiers causing

Congress to intercede and rule in favor of the new white "landowners."

Although central, land was not the only facet of Indian policy in the first half of the 1800's. The need to integrate or assimilate the Indians into the new civilized society gained popularity. Nearly everyone holding public office had a theory on the best way to accomplish this and acquire new lands at the same time. President Jefferson offered as a solution the intermarrying of whites and natives on a grand scale, in effect, claiming land by marriage. His plan was abruptly halted when he realized that the influence of the French might grow as they also put this theory into practice. Instead, having just completed the purchase of Louisiana territories in 1803, he saw the newly acquired land as a good home for the tribes.⁸ Ultimately, the Indians would be forced to cede their lands to the government as this new philosophy of removal matured.

In nearly every case throughout the century, tribe after tribe became victims of divisive and high pressure tactics, and relinquished control of their lands for paltry sums. Most deals involved the payment of annuities, often in the form of food and clothing, a practice that essentially turned the tribes into welfare dependents.

Indian relations during the federal government's first sixty years was, no doubt, complicated and difficult at best. An Indian policy did evolve, however, and although

many times inconsistent and vague, it was a policy. With few exceptions, the national leaders maintained high ideals with regards to the dignity, rights, and needs of the native American. In practice, however, greed, fraud, and corruption at lower levels of government had already begun to undermine federal efforts.

REMOVAL: THE ONLY SOLUTION

By the mid-1800's, the struggle among European powers for the North American empire had all but been settled. The need for the Indian as a loyal ally against French and British ambitions had diminished. This development made possible a drastic change in Indian policy, the most important feature of which was the need to remove the Indians from land needed for national expansion. Specifically, the Indians would be resettled in the Great American Desert which, of course, would never be desired by white settlers. Legislation defined boundaries and provided for Indian self-government, recognizing the tribes as national entities with public "ambassadors" appointed to make treaties with them.

The policy was formalized with the Act of May 28, 1830 which provided for the removal west of the Mississippi of all Indians, guaranteeing them new homes.⁹ Although this policy did not actually mark the official beginning of the

reservation system, the War Department did survey rough boundaries and assign agents to interface with the Indians living there. Thus, Jefferson's early removal plan became the foundation of the new federal Indian policy.

The removal strategy, however, did not proceed smoothly. It was conducted without adequate appropriations and planning, led to much Indian suffering, and once again divided the government on the Indian issue. In 1849, the Office of Indian Affairs was transferred to the newly created Department of Interior. This changing of the guard further complicated execution of policy as the War Department still retained control of the military removal of the Indians to reservations.¹⁰

This removal policy forced the bulk of the Indian population beyond the Mississippi River onto the edge of the Great Plains. Soon, as the flow of emigrants increased, it became obvious that it was becoming increasingly more difficult to remove the tribes beyond the limits of a constantly expanding frontier. The barrier system of segregating the Indians from the whites appeared inadequate.

By 1860, the reservation system had become widely accepted as the solution to the Indian problem. The option of using force was seldom questioned as it was generally agreed that any tribe that challenged the government's authority had to be crushed. It was apparent that more and

more the "solution" would ultimately be dominated by armed force.

THE WAR YEARS

For obvious reasons, very little positive and constructive work in the area of Indian affairs was accomplished during the Civil War. This does not mean, however, that the Indian problem was simply tabled by the government. In addition to the Indians imperiling emigrants in the frontier regions, many tribes had severed relations with Washington and were lending military aid to the seceded states.¹¹

This brief era of Indian relations was characterized by some particularly violent campaigns by both sides. In Minnesota, as an example, the Sioux killed 644 citizens during a bloody uprising, resulting in a series of campaigns by the Army launched to teach the red man respect for the authority of the government. Subsequently, numerous outbreaks and clashes took place throughout the course of the war between the states. THE NATION, a leading journal of opinion, commented: "Standing by itself, the war raged during the rebellion with the Indians would have seemed of huge and striking proportions. Not less than twenty-five thousand men have been and are now operating against the

aborigines."¹² The Indian problem had not subsided. In fact, it was becoming worse.

For the first time, a soft but very real cry for extermination as a solution to the Indian problem was beginning to be heard in Washington.

POST CIVIL WAR FOCUS

After the Civil War, as valuable minerals were found and word of the West's agricultural opportunities were reported, the nation's leadership was faced with yet another powerful surge of west bound settlers. Still in the way of this wave of progress was the American Indian.

By 1866 the U.S. continued its policy of conducting Indian affairs through treaties even though none of the tribes remotely resembled independent sovereignties. In fact, most tribes had become nearly totally dependent on the government and lived continuously near their serving agency. But, the tribes would still have to be removed from the path of westward expansion -- their title to the land would still have to be extinguished.

In that same year the Secretary of the Interior wrote: "It has been the settled policy of the government to establish the various tribes upon suitable reservations and there protect and subsist them until they can be taught to cultivate the soil and sustain themselves."¹³

Whatever the morality of it all, western emigrants would not be denied any Indian land that had agricultural or mineral potential. If the Indians were to survive, they must move out of the way and adapt the new methods, culture, and civilization. This policy, concluded the Secretary, "is no doubt the best, if not the only policy that can be pursued to preserve them from extinction."¹⁴

PRE-BIGHORN

The whole Indian Question is in such a snarl, that I am utterly powerless to help you by order or advice. Do the best you can.

*Sherman to Schofield
June 9, 1869*

By 1865 the nation was war weary, congress eager to cut military appropriations, and the President trying to initiate a more pacific policy toward the Indians. The Civil War had somewhat eroded support for military action in the west. Campaigns to subdue resisting Indians had resulted in the killing of women and children -- events that now made news since the war was over. Grant's Peace Policy discouraged offensive campaigns in favor of preparing the Indians for life in the white man's society through education, agriculture, and the industrial arts. So, the Army assumed a defensive posture. Until the Interior Department allowed military incursions onto the

reservations, there would be no major offensive against the plains tribes.¹⁵

But, the Peace Policy proved to be untenable for a number of reasons. The relentless push west, construction of the railroads, and the discovery of precious minerals began to unravel the Policy. Growing increasingly alarmed by the enormous white encroachment on their territories, the huge buffalo slaughter, and the loss of their traditional lands, Indians saw for the first time, that their very way of life was threatened with extinction. They struck with particular vengeance throughout the plains and Texas.

Realizing that it would require tenfold more cavalry to defend the vast expanse of the plains than it would to pursue and punish violator tribes, the Secretary of Interior authorized the Army to pursue hostiles onto reservation lands. Again the Army was allowed to take the offensive. The Indians would be forced back onto the reservations and made to behave in a "civilized manner."

A primary area of contention in the 1870's was the Black Hills region. The Black Hills lay in the heart of the Great Sioux Reservation, and rumors of gold had caused miners to violate the boundaries. To investigate the gold claims and encroachment by whites, Custer led a strong force into the area in the summer of 1874. While surveying a site for a possible new fort, his men discovered gold and the rush began. After futile attempts to stem the tide of

prospectors, it became clear that the only way to prevent conflict was to remove the Sioux to their outlying reservation areas -- a clear violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.

Ignoring a 31 January, 1876 deadline to vacate the Black Hills, the Sioux were found to be in violation of the government's ultimatum. Acting on the Commissioner of Indian Affairs's recommendation to begin offensives, the War department ordered the U.S. Army out to tame the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne.

THE '76 CAMPAIGNS

The Army immediately went about the task of organizing a major campaign for action in the Black hills. Hopes for quick success in a winter expedition stalled as Generals George Crook, Commander of the Department of the Platte, and Alfred Terry, Commander of the Department of Dakota, discovered how powerful an antagonist a northern plains winter could be. Finally, a March campaign was launched but, due to the fierce weather and some inept leadership, the effort produced disappointing results. The Army would have to settle for the less desirable option of a summer campaign.¹⁶

By June the Army was in full action having clashed with the Sioux and Cheyenne on numerous occasions. The

Indians were growing in strength and combativeness, and had even repulsed a major attack by Crook at the Rosebud.

The 7th Cavalry continued its aggressive pursuit of the "hostiles" -- and found them. The Regimental Adjutant's hastily written note calling for reinforcement, reflected the command's insatiable desire to win a major, immediate victory over the plains Indians.

*Benteen. Come on. Big village.
Be Quick. Bring packs.*

*W.W. Cook
P.S. Bring pacs.*

*Custer's Adjutant
June 25, 1876*

On the 25th of June, an impulsive Custer attacked with his weary regiment to destroy a large Sioux encampment. With little intelligence on enemy strength and disposition, and commencing a full day earlier than coordinated with Terry, the attack was doomed. The Battle of the Little Bighorn would be one of history's enduring controversies.

THE WORD SPREADS

Judged by standards of warfare in the nuclear age, the battle was an insignificant border skirmish. But, published material dealing with the engagement instantly began rolling off the nation's presses. Journalistic techniques in 1876 differed from those of today and writers used lofty and

impassioned prose that appealed primarily to the emotion of the reader. Several periodicals claimed to be the first to break the news of the defeat. The Boseman Times, The Helena Herald, the Helena Independent, and Salt Lake Tribune all published stories on July 5, but it was the Bismarck Tribune that provided the complete and corroborated story nation wide.¹⁷

Remember that throughout the 1800's the country had divided into two basic schools of thought about the Indian problem. Those on the frontier, because they felt the greatest threat, espoused a heavier-handed military approach. Those furthest east, being more secure and further removed from the problem, tended to favor a softer approach of assimilating the tribes into white society with programs of education, financial support, land programs, and fair treatment - - basically supporting Grant's Peace Plan. The fact that the frontier constantly moved west, pushing the Indians ahead of it, meant that the "secure" eastern territory grew larger and, correspondingly, the "secure" population. So, it seems did the movement for humane settlement of Indian affairs.

On July 6, the Bismarck Tribune headline read "MASSACRED." Underneath, the story began:

GEN. Custer and 261 men the victims. No officer or man of 5 companies left to tell the tale. Squaws mutilate and rob the dead. Victims captured alive and tortured in most

fiendish manner. What will Congress do about it? Shall this be the beginning of the end?

In Minneapolis - St. Paul the news was particularly shocking. The troopers of the 7th Cavalry were well known in the area as they had been stationed at Ft. Snelling and had been expected to return.

Back east, the New York Herald gave the story sensational treatment, complete with lurid accounts and a degree of embellishment. Easterners, preoccupied with the Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia, had scarcely known that an Indian war was in progress. The news of the death of a popular hero and the men of a widely known Army regiment shocked the people and drove the scope of the war into their consciousness.

The New York Herald was unique in the fact that it was considered by some to be Custer's own newspaper. It was pro-Custer, pro-Army, anti-Grant Administration, and wavering on Indian Policy. In effect it would have lined up better with the frontier papers than with its eastern peers.

In fact, at least in their initial stories, few papers, not even in the more pacific East, took the side of the Indian. Most blamed the Grant Administration for the state of affairs that led to the massacre.

The New York Herald led an assault on the Administration's method of handling Indians declaring "The celebrated Peace Policy of General Grant, which feeds

clothes, and takes care of the noncombatant force while the men are killing our troops - that is what killed Custer."¹⁸

The President's "timid, vacillating, indecisive" policy "with its concomitant curses of swindling agents and corrupt rings" was the real reason for problems with the Indians according to the Indianapolis Sentinel.

The South took a strong anti-Grant stance, with the Mobile Register and the New York Picayune calling for the U.S. troops to be removed from the South and sent "where the honor of the flag ... may be redeemed."¹⁹ This, of course, suited most Southerners as it would remove the "army of occupation" from Dixie and at the same time address the Indian problem.

Naturally, it was the western press that cried loudest for blood. The Yankton Dakotaian declared that the Indians were not even men but beasts and wondered if these same Indians would be welcomed back to the agencies to receive the charity of the brothers of the men they had killed at Bighorn. And, the Chicago Times said, "Public sentiment on the frontier demands that these outrages be punished." Other papers demanded the abolition of all treaties and agencies, and called for punitive actions against the Indians.²⁰

There was a small minority of newspapers which dared to take a softer stand on the issue during their initial journalistic volleys. The Springfield Massachusetts Union,

for example, suggested that the Sioux were not the aggressors and cried foul at thoughts of extermination. But these viewpoints were countered with strong verbal attacks against its editors, accusing them of "maudlin sympathy", inexcusable ignorance, and malicious disinformation.²¹ Because of the emotional upheaval, Western editors naturally had less regard for fact and reason than those in the East.

THE ARMY REACTS

The Little Bighorn battle impacted the Army almost immediately. Although a small minority of the officer corps, taking the President's view, targeted Custer's impetuous tactics as reason for the tragedy, most expressed outrage at the Indian agencies' incompetence. The War Department declared that the Indian Bureau's mismanagement and ineffective conciliatory measures had failed to control the hostiles. But the more damning accusations came directly from Army leadership who blamed the Bureau for providing census information that severely underestimated the number of Indians in the Black Hills region. Had the planners been aware of the true numbers, they claimed, campaign plans would have been adjusted to meet the threat.

Relations between the Interior and War Departments became even more strained than usual. The Army realizing itself to be an instrument of Interior's policies, cried for

more general authority over the Indians. Seeking something close to unlimited war, the Army saw the notoriety of Custer's defeat as an opportunity to add impetus to their longstanding request that Congress authorize more troops and forts for the frontier.²²

Little Bighorn profoundly affected the minds of the Army's officers, especially those on the frontier. Cook and Terry immediately began to exercise greater caution than ever before, awaiting reinforcements prior to continuing any campaigns. Downplaying the possibility that perhaps the tactics used against the Indians may be flawed, the officer corps felt that "an enemy powerful enough to inflict so appalling a disaster seemed at the time to demand heavier armies than have yet been fielded."²³ In this light, the Army renewed its force structure battle with Congress.

Naturally, there was popular support for using the Army to put an end to the Indian problem. Many civic organizations not normally associated with military and political issues, now spoke out publicly. The Detroit Post, on July 11, published the minutes of the Audubon Club which, during passage of a formal resolution honoring Custer and the Seventh, included a petition to "earnestly invoke swift and terrible retribution upon his savage slayers."

Likewise, Army officers became more vocal. Although Generals' comments were commonly seen in print, now young officers felt compelled to pick up the pen. Many complained

that while the Indians gathered strength and weapons, the Army was becoming more and more hollow. A letter to the editor of the New York Herald, published August 6, typified the feeling of frustration that many young officers experienced in the weeks following Little Bighorn.

Our companies and regiments are not kept up, and when an emergency does arise the men to do the work are not there, and recruits for cavalry are almost useless till drilled for several months. We have too much infantry and not enough cavalry and moreover, our infantry are kept in many places where they are useless.

An Army Officer
Fort Sill, I.T.
July 27, 1876

Even before Congress could act on the Army's newly inspired resource initiatives, hundreds of troops from other departments poured into the Black Hills region. The Army began confiscating the horses and guns of even the "peaceful" agency Indians. Additional campaigns against the Sioux and Cheyenne were planned. The tempo of actions against the Indians would reach unprecedented levels as the Army waged a relentless campaign against the tribes in the west. In the minds of the Army's officers, new public tolerance of cries for "all out" war redefined the use and limits of force. It was the beginning of the end of the Indian's armed resistance. As a result of the public

reaction to Little Bighorn they had lost all chance of a "negotiated peace."

After the Little Bighorn massacre, the Army gave increasing support to the slaughter of the buffalo. Throughout the 1870's the Army recognized that the ongoing slaughter of the great herds of plains bison might be the best way to force the Indians to change their nomadic habits and remain on reservations. The Army and Navy Journal supported this view and compared it to campaigns against Confederate supplies and food sources. It's difficult to determine how actively the Army participated in the elimination of the bison but forts routinely provided support for hunters. And, the Army, often the only legitimate authority present, allowed it to happen.

As protests against the wanton killing increased in the mid-1870's, calls for the Army to stop the slaughter had received the attention of the Army's leadership. But following the defeat at Bighorn, little sympathy for the buffalo existed in the Army. As one officer put it: "better to kill buffalo than have him feed the Sioux". Even Sheridan was quoted as saying, "if I could learn that every buffalo in the northern herd were killed, I would be glad".²⁴

Would the public outcry against the slaughter of American bison have averted the complete destruction of the plains herd? It's impossible to say. But the great Sioux

victory at the Little Bighorn certainly did nothing to gain support for the preservation of a primary Indian food source. It was evident, now, that the Army was not about to protect the buffalo.

CONGRESS RESPONDS

It will take another Phil Kearney massacre to bring Congress up to a generous support of the Army.

G.A. Custer
January, 1876

Custer had, along with much of the officer corps, been critical of Congress' slow pace in dealing with Army requirements. With public opinion now strongly behind a swift military solution to the Indian issue, Congress was motivated into action. Its sudden interest was also caused, in no small way, by the fact that 1876 was an election year.

Within thirty days of the massacre, Congress voted funds to build two forts on the Yellowstone that Sheridan had been promoting for over three years. And shortly thereafter, the legislators voted to include in the Army appropriation bill, language authorizing the President to exceed the twenty-five thousand man end-strength cap by twenty-five hundred additional troopers -- which he promptly did.²⁵

Also in reaction to Little Bighorn, Congress rushed to include in the August 15 appropriation bill that all funds for Sioux Indian subsistence would be denied until they relinquished all claim to the unceded territory and the Black Hills. A terrible setback for the Indians, there was no longer any hope of retaining their sacred lands or gaining some compensation through "sale" of the Black Hills. Facing the possibility of starvation and total defeat by the Army, the chiefs at Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, and the Missouri River Agencies conceded.²⁶

And under heavy pressure from Congress, the Interior Secretary finally bowed to Sheridan's insistence on military control of all Sioux agencies. Army officers would soon replace Bureau agents.

With surprising support and funding from Congress, troops were rushed to the west by rail and river steamer. The Army finally had a virtual free hand in Sioux country.

AND THEN THERE'S POLITICS

The Custer massacre was a political God-send for the Democrats in an election year. The Little Bighorn disaster seemed almost the perfect culmination of alleged Administration corruption, and frontier fraud and mismanagement. The Democrats rallied around it. Remember that the eastern population had scarcely paid serious notice

to the frontier Indian Wars previous to the demise of the 7th Cavalry. Now suddenly, thanks primarily to the press, the Democratic political machine could put the "incompetence" of frontier policies in the spotlight.

Nearly every newspaper account of the massacre was accompanied by an editorial blaming the Grant Administration for the disaster. The New York Herald, of course, remained the most scathing and began to attack Grant personally. In the Herald's July 10 edition:

Someone has blundered and there are strong grounds for ascribing the mismanagement to the President himself.

and:

It would be hardly too severe to say to President Grant, "Behold your hands! they are red with the blood of Custer and his brave 300.

With election rhetoric heating up, the timing could not have been better for the Administration's opposition. To counter any possible notion that Grant may have of a third term, many newspapers purposely began an assault on him at the end of each Custer article.

The Herald again on July 12:

The country will stand anything rather than a prolonged reign of Grantism.

Other newspapers attempted to weave the issue into the political platform of other Presidential candidates. The St. Louis Globe Democrat on July 9 made these statements at the end of a column on Little Bighorn:

The people are anxious to learn the attitude of Governor Hayes toward Grant and Grantism.

We will soon know, and the Presidential election may turn on Mr. Hayes' political intrepidity or the lack of it.

Many thought that Grant, being in his second term and possibly not seeking a third, felt no real pressure to do something -- election year or not. In a September 25 Herald article following an interview with the President, the correspondent thought that Grant gave the impression that he considered settlement of the Indian problem beyond the range of his term of office. The article stated:

Whether our worthy friend, Sitting Bull, will therefore be ignominiously compelled to raise cattle instead of scalping white soldiers will probably depend either on Governor Hayes or Governor Tilden.

How much Grant's defeat in the primary elections was affected by all the fuss over the defeat of the 7th Cavalry is subject to debate. Certainly, the hysteria brought the Administration's Peace Policy to the national forefront for

the first time and provided a large target that the Republicans had to defend.

One thing is sure. The incident woke both parties to the fact that something was going to have to be done out West -- something besides the Peace Plan.

THE END OF A MOVEMENT

The sensationalized defeat of the 7th Cavalry had a subtle, little known, but very profound effect on one movement that may have provided the greatest hope for the Indian's future -- the Movement for Indian Assimilation.

Three decades earlier, reformers were already actively promoting programs to counter the removal policy. Rather than push the tribes from one location to another as the frontier inched west, their plan would have immigrants "flow" around the tribes who would be able to essentially remain in place. Of course, even though the Indians would not have to leave, they would still have to change many of their traditional ways of living. For example, because hunting would be restricted as whites crowded onto the land, the Indians would have to be taught to farm or be educated in a trade. Practical Christian teachers would instruct them in religion and the other arts of civilization, and soon whites and Indians would be living side-by-side. The

Indian would have to change his lifestyle but it was better than being forced from one reservation to another.²⁷

As late as 1876, the movement for assimilation of the Indians was still quite strong especially in the populated East. It had full support from most of the country's religious leaders and was in basic concert with Grant's Peace Plan. Its lobby in Congress was strong and getting stronger. The movement was on the brink of a new effort at the national level.

Public opinion toward the movement, as well as many of its support organizations, turned suddenly against the cause in July 1876. Even the Christian ladies of the Indian Hope Association in Philadelphia, one the movement's strongest proponents, admitted that the red men had given " little cause for sympathy" and therefor they must suspend their efforts for the Indians. ²⁸

It would be years before the movement would recover from the Custer setback. By then it would be too late to help the already subjugated tribes.

CONCLUSION

It was, as the Bismarck Tribune had said, "the beginning of the end" for the plains Indians. The battle at the Little Bighorn was an acceleration point in U. S. Indian affairs. Spurred on by a sensational press, the nation

clamored for an end to the years long "problem" with the Indians. The country all but abandoned what sympathy remained for the red man.

The Army aggressively and successfully cried for more troops while it transitioned its tactics to the "all-out" style of campaigns used during the Civil War. Army officers took charge of the Sioux agencies and an emotional Congress built new forts; Forts Keogh and Custer followed by Assinniboine, Maginnis, Meade, Robinson, and Niobrara erected to counter the new and more capable threat -- the Sioux.

Also as a direct result of their victory in Montana, the Sioux lost their beloved Black hills forever and were pursued with a vengeance they had not yet experienced. "Negotiation" was no longer in the government's vocabulary.

The Democrats suffered most as Republicans and the press convinced most of America that the Administration's weak, conciliatory policies were responsible for the death of one of the country's great heroes.

And finally, the Indian suddenly lost his one strong lobby in Congress. The discredited reformers who advocated compromise, a soft approach, and a halt to military action were rendered completely ineffective. The Little Bighorn catastrophe had dealt a death blow to Grant's Peace Policy leading to the Army's rampage on the reservations as well as off.

After Little Bighorn it did not take long. By 1890, just fourteen years later, the statisticians of the Census Bureau discovered that they could no longer trace a distinct frontier of settlement on the map of the United States. General Sherman would soon write, "I now regard the Indians as substantially eliminated from the problem of the Army."²⁹

*They made us many promises,
more than I can remember,
but they never kept but one;
they promised to take our
land and they took it.³⁰*

Old Sioux Warrior
1891

ENDNOTES

¹George D. Harmon, Sixty Years of Indian Affairs (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 1.

²Ibid., 2.

³Ibid., 3.

⁴Georgiana C. Nammack, Fraud, Politics, and the Dispossession of the Indians (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 4.

⁵Harmon, 5.

⁶Ibid., 54-55.

⁷Ibid., 58.

⁸Ibid., 93.

⁹Annie H. Abel, The History of Events Resulting in the Consolidation West of the Mississippi River (Annual Report of the American Historical Society, 1906), 370-412.

¹⁰Robert Wooster, The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11-12.

¹¹H.G. Waltman, The Interior Department, War Department, and Indian Policy, 1865-1887 (Ann Arbor University Microfilms, 1963), 19.

¹²Ibid., 24.

¹³Robert M. Utley, Frontier Regulars, the United States Army and the American Indian, 1866-1887 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), 7.

¹⁴Ibid., 8.

¹⁵Wooster, 145-146.

¹⁶Utley, 248-260.

¹⁷Robert M. Utley, Custer and the Great Controversy (Pasadena: Westernlore Press, 1980), 30-32.

¹⁸Ibid., 39.

¹⁹Ibid., 41.

²⁰Henry E. Fritz, The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860-1890 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 176.

²¹Ibid., 178.

²²Waltman, 278-279.

²³Utley, 271.

²⁴Wooster, 173.

²⁵Waltman, 279.

²⁶Utley, Frontier Regulars, 267-278.

²⁷Fritz, 37-40.

²⁸Ibid., 185.

²⁹Ibid., 400-404.

³⁰Ibid., 401.

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