
**Overview:** George Armstrong Custer was a lieutenant colonel in the American Civil War and the Indian Wars of the mid 19th century. Custer is best remembered in American history not for his military successes, or his inhumane position on Native Americans, but for the way in which he died—vastly outnumbered in a battle along the Little Bighorn River. Typically referred to as “Custer’s Last Stand,” The Battle at Little Bighorn was an ill-planned military disaster in America’s centennial year. However, American history has sensationalized, glossed over, and romanticized his death and the violence that ensued in the American West.

Nathaniel Philbrick’s *The Last Stand* situates the events of The Battle of Little Big Horn in its historic context by stressing the connection between American government in Washington and the events taking place in the Black Hills region of South Dakota, where the battle took place in 1876. Custer’s discovery of gold in the Cheyenne and Siouz-owned Black Hills increased American expansionism into the American West. The struggle over land culminated in violence and the eventual displacement of the Cheyenne and Sioux who populated the area. Their displacement was the most significant example of a resource-driven pattern of violence and displacement that informed Native American policy.

Philbrick considers the battle, Custer, and his primary opposition, Sitting Bull, as small, to be interconnected fragments of a larger narrative. These are not the standalone, timeless figures on a primitive landscape of myth. By tracing the trajectory of the years leading up to the Battle of Little Bighorn, and peppering this narrative with descriptive anecdotes that add human complexity to these major icons, Philbrick breathes life into a
story that at this point, may be dismissed off-hand as cultural cliché. Perhaps the most valuable and significant lesson in Philbrick’s work is his exploration of how media manipulation has altered public memory, and how the Battle at Little Bighorn was not only a “last stand” for Custer, but was also a last stand for the Cheyenne and Sioux, who within a few years had all been forced onto reservations.

Philbrick agrees that individual attributes are integral to describing historic events. Through understanding Custer and Sitting Bull’s personalities we can gain a fuller understanding of how individual motives translate into actions. Though Philbrick asserts that the “myth applies equally to his legendary opponent Sitting Bull,” it is with Custer that he begins the story and it is with Custer that he ends it. Custer is, if not the focus, the figure who attracts the reader’s attention at the beginning and holds it until the end. Philbrick describes Custered as a flawed complex man who was “too much of an opportunist to commit to one single approach.” One of the points that Philbrick stresses throughout the narrative is Custer’s deep concern for his public image. In this story, we can see the beginnings of a celebrity culture in American media. Custer was an adept self-promoter, often making decisions based on how he would look to the American public. Philbrick describes Custer and Sitting Bull as “cagey manipulators of the media”.

In addition, Philbrick refers to Custer’s wife Libbie as “the ultimate spin doctor” and “part promoter, part cultural intermediary.” Even within days and weeks that followed the battle, Libbie Custer’s promotion went a long way towards ensuring that Custer would be remembered in a positive light.

1 http://nathanielphilbrick.com/books/the-last-stand/interview
It is difficult to reconcile Custer’s behavior, partially because it is so erratic. At times he appears sympathetic to Native American interests, and others he appears deeply cruel. In attempts to present a fair account, Philbrick struggles to present many pieces of information that are often at direct odds with each other. Often the truth is impossible to confirm, especially within the onslaught of conflicting accounts and opinions. Though he does not hold back in relaying some of the Custer’s more unflattering moments, he also regards the story and its major players with optimism, perhaps more heavy-handed optimism than it deserves. In an interview, he describes the Battle of Little Bighorn as “an event which demonstrated that even a country with the best of intentions didn’t always do the right thing.”

Nonetheless, Philbrick’s extensive research is commendable. One of the book’s biggest strengths is Philbrick’s deft handling of this contradictory material, choosing to provide a material of great density and depth rather than whittling down his research into a more simplistic framing. Philbrick’s work reexamines a story so often told that it has achieved mythic status in American culture. He describes the depth and breadth of information surrounding this story as a “hall of mirrors”. Instead of attempting to rise above the sea of diverse, and often conflicting, information by condensing it into one linear narrative, he chose to immerse himself in it.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* This book’s release, in 2010, is geared towards a new generation of readers- those who may be relatively unfamiliar with past commentary (media or historical narratives) on Custer, Sitting Bull, or the battle. For current students of American Studies, and particularly the American West class, it is a nearly flawless example of a new western historical perspective, one that views the
West as a diverse, conflicted, and ever-changing region, not a singular pioneer process. It is a story that can be applied to almost any American Studies course. The nature of power and military leadership, the role of the media, and American hegemony are all vividly apparent in the story of the Battle of Little Bighorn. Besides being an example of how new western historians can debunk some of the myths of the American West, *The Last Stand* succeeds in spinning a narrative that does not need to compromise its complexity for the sake of readability.