

The Jury Is Out

DID CUSTER MAKE A STAND?



“Custer’s Last Stand” evokes notions of a war hero fearlessly advancing in a doomed battle. What really happened remains unclear.

The Wild, Wild West

Custer’s Last Stand, the legendary designation for the Battle of Little Bighorn, occurred during the climax of the Indian Wars of the 1860s and ’70s, when the U.S. government corralled the western Native American tribes onto small reservations. In 1874, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the government sent troops to make sure Native Americans steered clear of the jackpot.

Such was the backdrop for the Battle of Little Bighorn. In June 1876, word spread that a large number of Native Americans had gathered under the auspices of Lakota (Sioux) leader Chief Sitting Bull. Army units throughout the Montana Territory planned to converge on and attack the gatherers, and General George Armstrong Custer led the Seventh Cavalry in this effort. At the time, Custer was already a Civil War hero known for his reckless yet successful military campaigns. On June 25, he and his cavalry stumbled upon the encampment. Fearing that Native American scouts were aware of his movements, he decided to attack before waiting for reinforcements.

A Story With No One to Tell It

The truth of Custer’s Last Stand remains unclear because everyone under his direct command died in battle. With the intention of surrounding the native encampment, Custer divided his approximately 600 men into four battalions. Custer’s doomed group numbered around 260 men.

Historical evidence suggests that when Custer’s battalion attacked, they thought there were mostly women and children in the village. The plan may have been to take them hostage or use them as a shield. Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors had been fighting with another Seventh Cavalry battalion but quickly moved on to Custer’s when they learned it had gotten closer to the women and children. The number of Indians involved in the attack is uncertain, but estimates range from 900 to 1,800. It is likely that the encounter lasted less than an hour; all of Custer’s men were killed. Estimates of Native American deaths range from 36 to 300. The remaining battalions of the Seventh Cavalry fought into the following day, though they did not suffer in the same numbers and were shocked to learn of Custer’s crushing defeat.

The Evolution of a Myth

The Battle of Little Bighorn created a popular sensation. At this stage in the war, a devastating rout at the hands of Native Americans was unexpected. Despite scattered calls of criticism against Custer’s tactics, he was eulogized as a hero. Books, plays, paintings, and eventually movies depicted Custer as the last to die, surrounded by the remaining soldiers who, in the final moments of combat, organized an epic “last stand.”

The reality of this scenario is contested. Based on the positions of bullet shells and fallen soldiers, it is likely that Custer’s men quickly and unexpectedly realized they were in a hopeless situation. The last men to die possibly gathered for a final effort at the top of Custer Hill, where they’d retreated.

In recent decades, the saga of the Battle of Little Bighorn has slowly replaced the myth of Custer’s Last Stand. Native Americans and others have sought to revise the battle’s legacy, which at the time was used to fuel anti-Indian sentiment. A multicultural history of the United States would not see the Battle of Little Bighorn as simply a devastating defeat epitomized by the heroic “last stand” of a fallen national hero—it was most certainly a fleeting victory for Native Americans.