

June 25, 1876: Commemorating an Historic Event

Read the description of the Battle of Little Bighorn and list in order the five major events that led to the battle and summarize the reasons why the U.S. army lost. In class tomorrow, be prepared to discuss the chronology of events that led to the battle.

In 1868, some Lakota Sioux leaders agreed to the Fort Laramie Treaty, creating a large reservation in South Dakota and Nebraska. The Lakota further agreed to cease raids against settlers, survey crews, and other enemy tribes in favor of settling on the reservation and accepting government subsidies.

Lakota Sioux leaders such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse opposed this policy. They feared becoming too dependent on the government, preferring to remain out on the plains as they had always done, far away from the treaty-reservation system. These roving bands of hunters and warriors had not signed the 1868 treaty and consequently felt no obligation to conform to its restrictions. They did not limit their hunting activities to the unceded land assigned to the reservation Lakota for that purpose and made sporadic forays against white settlers and enemy tribes on the fringes of the frontier. These non-reservation Lakota were reinforced during the summer months by groups known as summer roamers. These Indians had left the reservation temporarily to join hunting and raiding parties. The first snowfall usually saw these bands back on the reservation for the winter.

Problems were further complicated in 1874 when Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer was ordered to make an exploration of the Black Hills in the heart of the Lakota Sioux reservation. Fearing that intimidation by the summer roamers was jeopardizing the process of assimilating others on the reservation, General Philip H. Sheridan recommended a fort be constructed and garrisoned in the Black Hills, so that the army could respond to trouble quickly. Custer was to map the area and locate several suitable locations for future military posts. During the expedition, professional geologists discovered deposits of gold in paying quantities, and the resultant rush of entrepreneurs to the Black Hills was met with violence by the Sioux, who considered the whites as unwelcome interlopers on sacred ground. The following year the U.S. government attempted to buy the Black Hills for six million dollars. The area was considered sacred by the Sioux and they refused to sell. Custer's story attracted gold hunters, and in April 1876 the mining town of Deadwood was established in the area. All of these issues finally climaxed in the winter of 1875 when the Commissioner of Indian Affairs issued an ultimatum requiring all of the non-reservation Sioux to report to a reservation by the end of January, 1876. The deadline came and went with virtually no response, and matters were handed over to the military.

On May 17, 1876, Sioux warriors killed and scalped five settlers in the Black Hills, and over the next couple of days there were seven more cases of men being murdered by the Sioux. On June 17, General George Crook and about 1,000 troops, supported by 300 Crow and Shoshone, fought against 1,500 members of the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes. The battle at Rosebud Creek lasted for over six hours. This was the first time that Native Americans had united to fight in such large numbers. On June 18, General William Sherman declared, "Forbearance has ceased to be a virtue toward these Indians, and only a severe and persistent chastisement will bring them to a sense of submission." On June 22, George A. Custer and 655 men were sent out to locate the villages of the Sioux and Cheyenne involved in the battle at Rosebud Creek. A very large encampment was discovered three days later. It was over fifteen miles away and even with field glasses Custer was unable to discover the number of warriors the camp contained.

To force the large Indian army back to the reservations, the Army dispatched three columns to attack in coordinated fashion. One of the columns contained Lieutenant Colonel George Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. Spotting the Sioux village about fifteen miles away along the Rosebud River on June 25, Custer also found a nearby group of about forty warriors. Ignoring orders to wait, he decided to attack before they could alert the main party. He did not realize

that the number of warriors in the village were three times his strength. Dividing his forces in three, Custer sent troops under Captain Frederick Benteen to prevent the warriors' escape through the upper valley of the Little Bighorn River. Major Marcus Reno was to pursue the group, cross the river, and charge the Indian village in a coordinated effort with the remaining troops under his command. He hoped to strike the Indian encampment at the northern and southern ends simultaneously, but made this decision without knowing what kind of terrain he would have to cross before making his assault. He belatedly discovered that he would have to negotiate a maze of bluffs and ravines to attack.

Reno's squadron of 175 soldiers attacked the southern end. Quickly finding the squadron in a desperate battle with little hope of any relief, Reno halted his charging men before they could be trapped, fought for ten minutes in dismounted formation, and then withdrew into the timber and brush along the river. When that position proved indefensible, the soldiers retreated uphill to the bluffs east of the river, pursued hotly by a mix of Cheyenne and Sioux.

Just as they finished driving the soldiers out, the Indians found roughly 210 of Custer's men coming towards the other end of the village, taking the pressure off of Reno's men. Cheyenne and Hunkpapa Sioux together crossed the river and slammed into the advancing soldiers, forcing them back to a long high ridge to the north. Meanwhile, another force, largely Oglala Sioux under Crazy Horse's command, swiftly moved downstream and then doubled back in a sweeping arc, enveloping Custer and his men in a pincer move. They began pouring in gunfire and arrows.

As the Indians closed in, Custer ordered his men to shoot their horses and stack the carcasses to form a wall, but that provided little protection against bullets. In less than an hour, Custer and his men were killed in the worst American military disaster ever. After another day's fighting, the now united forces of Reno and Benteen escaped when the Indians broke off the fight. They had learned that the other two columns of soldiers were coming toward them, so they fled.

After the battle, the Indians came through and stripped the bodies and mutilated all the uniformed soldiers, believing that the soul of a mutilated body would be forced to walk the earth for all eternity and could not ascend to heaven. Inexplicably, they stripped Custer's body and cleaned it, but did not scalp or mutilate it. Custer had been wearing buckskins instead of a blue uniform, and some believe that the Indians thought he was not a soldier and so, thinking he was an innocent, left him alone. Because his hair was cut short for battle, others think that he did not have enough hair to allow for a very good scalping. Immediately after the battle, the myth emerged that the Indians left him alone out of respect for his fighting ability, but since few participating Indians knew who he was, it is unlikely that this was why the body was not scalped or mutilated, and to this day, the real reason for this restraint is unknown.

The U.S. army responded to the battle of the Little Bighorn by increasing the number of the soldiers in the area. As a result, leaders of the attack such as Sitting Bull and Gall fled to Canada, whereas Crazy Horse and his followers surrendered to General George Crook at the Red Cloud Agency in Nebraska. Crazy Horse was later killed while being held in custody at Fort Robinson.

Little Bighorn was the pinnacle of the Indians' power. They had achieved their greatest victory yet, but soon their tenuous union fell apart in the face of the white onslaught. Outraged over the death of a popular Civil War hero on the eve of the Centennial, the U.S. public demanded and received harsh retribution. The Black Hills dispute was quickly settled by redrawing the boundary lines, placing the Black Hills outside the reservation and open to white settlement. Within a year, the Sioux nation had been defeated and broken. "Custer's Last Stand" was also the last stand of the Sioux nation.

Based in part on: <http://www.nps.gov/libi/battle.html>