

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Document-Based Activity

Part 5: Battle of the Greasy Grass

MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

The Greasy Grass and the Little Bighorn

On Sunday, June 25, 1876, 263 US soldiers were killed by a combined force of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors along a small river called the Little Bighorn, located in present-day Montana. While this particular fact is not disputed, just about every other aspect of the battle remains a matter of perspective and interpretation. Even the name of the battle depends on which side is telling the story. Among Indians, the encounter that led to the defeat of Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer's entire command is called the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Many historians call the encounter the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In popular history, it is often referred to as Custer's Last Stand.

Why is this event so controversial? Clearly, Custer and the 7th Cavalry were defeated. However, the causes of the battle and the reasons for Custer's defeat are still open to debate. Why? First, since Custer and all of his troops who participated in the encounter died, there are no first-hand accounts of the battle from their perspective. There are numerous eyewitness accounts from Indian participants, but the white historians who have written the traditional history of the event have largely ignored them. Second, contemporary Indian accounts challenged the traditional description of Custer's gallant last stand and, more recently, archaeological evidence questions these traditional interpretations as well. Finally, who ultimately "won" the battle is also debatable. While the Indians won the battle, they lost the war, and their victory at Greasy Grass unfortunately set into motion actions by the US government that would result in the eventual removal of the Lakota and the Cheyenne from the Black Hills.

A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR

The following activity asks students to address the controversy surrounding the battle from the perspective of white Americans and Indians. The sources presented all come from contemporaries who experienced the battle firsthand or learned about it shortly after. Many are newspaper accounts, since the battle was extensively reported in the press. Others are from transcripts of interviews of Indian participants, conducted years after the battle. The Lakota tribe was often referred to as the Sioux during the nineteenth century, so that name appears in many of the primary sources, although it is not commonly used today. Also, while Custer's military rank was Lieutenant Colonel when he died at the Little Bighorn, he is sometimes referred to as "General" in the sources.

Steps to Complete:

1. Students complete Part 5 of the game. Briefly discuss what they experienced.
 2. Review the background information and instructions as a class. Divide the class into small groups.
 3. Distribute the "Voices of the United States" packet to half of the groups and the "Voices of the Plains Indians" packet to the other half.
 4. After the students have carefully read the sources and answered the questions, distribute the "Class Debate" organizer. Conduct a debate in which the students argue from their assigned perspectives what really happened at the Battle of the Little Bighorn/Battle of the Greasy Grass, focusing on who was responsible for the battle itself and for Custer's defeat.
 5. After the debate concludes, ask students what they think really happened, and why they think setting the record straight matters for historians and for Americans.
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The Greasy Grass and the Little Bighorn: Student Background

The Battle of the Greasy Grass, also known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn or Custer's Last Stand, was a battle fought along the bluffs and ravines of the Little Bighorn River in what is now the state of Montana. On the morning of Sunday, June 25, 1876, the 7th Regiment of the US Cavalry, led by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, battled a combined force of warriors from the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes. By June 26, Custer and all 262 of his men were dead.

The battle was the culmination of mounting tensions between white settlers and Indians that resulted from the inadequacies of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. First, not all Indian leaders agreed to the terms of the treaty; therefore, they were not willing to confine themselves to government reservations or to hunting only on the lands identified in the treaty. Poor conditions on the government reservations also forced Indians off of the designated lands, frustrating white settlers who called for a greater military presence and the construction of more forts. Indians were likewise frustrated by the arrival of more white settlers on their lands, as well as the expansion of railroads.

These tensions increased in 1874, when Custer was ordered to explore the Black Hills on the Great Sioux Reservation, an area sacred to the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes, and an important hunting ground. Custer's mission was to determine a suitable site for a fort and to survey the natural resources, especially gold, in the area.

The confirmation of gold in the Black Hills made the area very attractive to white settlers, who did not hesitate to violate the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty. The US government attempted to buy the land from the Lakota, but when they refused, the Bureau of Indian Affairs issued an order, requiring all Plains Indians to report to a reservation by January 31, 1876. When a number of Lakota and Cheyenne bands refused to comply, the US government turned to a military solution, declaring the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne "hostile" nations. Several thousand US troops were sent to find the Lakota and Cheyenne bands and "return" them to the reservations.

Although Custer didn't realize it, the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes had already assembled along the Powder, Rosebud, Bighorn, and Yellowstone Rivers in early June to take advantage of the well-watered hunting grounds, and to participate in the annual Sun Dance Ceremony. Although the Indians were aware of the US soldiers in the area, they never expected the army would attack such a large encampment.

Custer's 7th Cavalry was part of a larger force, which was supposed to ensure that the Indians were unable to escape and disappear into the surrounding area. Custer's decision to attack once he believed his position had been revealed was one of the most controversial decisions in American military history. While Custer's Last Stand was publicized at the time and for many generations



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thereafter as a heroic sacrifice, many historians today view the decision and the ensuing battle as a huge mistake. Custer was outnumbered and outmaneuvered. A retreat would have saved many lives.

While the Battle of the Greasy Grass was a great victory for the Lakota and Cheyenne, it was used to justify the deployment of more troops to the region, intent on revenge and on confining the Lakota and Cheyenne to reservations. As illustrated in Part 5 of "A Cheyenne Odyssey," most of the "hostile" Indians surrendered within one year of the battle. Moreover, the Black Hills were taken by the US government without any compensation to the Indians, who held those lands to be sacred. Even today, the possession of the Black Hills remains a point of contention between the US government and the Lakota. While the Indians won the Battle of Greasy Grass, they lost the larger war, and their initial victory set into motion actions by the US government that would result in their eventual defeat.

(Adapted from <http://www.nps.gov/libi/historyculture/index.htm>.)

Directions:

On Sunday, June 25, 1876, 263 U.S. soldiers were killed by a combined force of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors along a small river called the Little Bighorn, located in present-day Montana. While this particular fact is not disputed, just about every other aspect remains a matter of perspective and interpretation. Even the name of the battle depends on which side is telling the story. Among Indians, the encounter that led to the defeat of Lt. Colonel George Armstrong's entire command, and one of the greatest military victories of Indians over the US army, is called the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Many historians call the encounter the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In popular history, it is often referred to as Custer's Last Stand.

To better understand the events leading up to the Battle of the Little Bighorn/Battle of the Greasy Grass and what happened on June 25-26, 1876, you and your classmates will explore the event from the perspective of white Americans and Indians, like Little Fox, who fought in or witnessed the battle. Carefully read the documents assigned to your group. Then, answer the questions. Be prepared to participate in a class debate aimed at answering the question:

**Who really won the Battle of the Greasy Grass/Battle of the Little Bighorn,
and why does it matter?**



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Voices from the United States

Source 1:

On the 9th of November, 1875, United States Indian Inspector E. C. Watkins reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs:

"I have the honor to address you in relation to the attitude of certain wild and hostile bands of Sioux Indians in Dakota and Montana that came under my observation during my recent tour through their country, and what I think should be the policy of the Government toward them. I refer to Sitting Bull's band and other bands of the Sioux Nation under chiefs or "head-men" of less note, but no less untamable and hostile. These Indians occupy the center, so to speak, and roam over Western Dakota, and Eastern Montana, including the rich valleys of the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers, and make war on ... friendly tribes on the circumference.

From their central position they strike to the East, North, and West, steal horses, and plunder from all the surrounding tribes, as well as frontier settlers and luckless white hunters or emigrants who are not in sufficient force to resist them. . . .

The true policy, in my judgment, is to send troops against them in the winter, the sooner the better, and whip them into subjection. They richly merit punishment for their incessant warfare, and their numerous murders of white settlers and their families, or white men wherever found unarmed."

(Source: Watkins Report cited in letter from J.D. Cameron, Secretary of War to President Grant July 8, 1876, <http://www.littlebighorn.info/Articles/gra8876.htm>)

Source 2:

"The Black Hills fever is at its height all over this section of the country, and reminds me of the times of '49. All along the Union Pacific Railroad men in India rubber coats, high boots, belts, bowie-knives and pistols are to be seen, and the outfitting establishments at Omaha and Cheyenne, and in fact, all along the line, are doing a rattling business.

The sturdy young farmer, yielding to the pressure and ambitions for sudden wealth. drops his plow, and rushes in with the motley-gang, and shouts "Hurrah, for the Black Hills!" The war-whoop of the poor Indian is to be heard all along the route, but what cares the modern-built American representative for Indian yelps, while he sniffs the scent of gold in the air. . .

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That there is gold can be but little doubt, for the old adage, "Where there is so much smoke there must be some fire," holds good in this case. The Bighorn country and the Black Hills are beginning to swarm....The buffalo is no longer to be seen in this region, except upon very rare occasions, and even on the Yellowstone and the Missouri Rivers, they are indeed a scarcity."

(Source: "The Black Hills Excitement," Cincinnati Daily Times, April 7, 1876)

Source 3:

"Our women's hearts fell when the fiat went forth that there was to be a summer [1876] campaign, with probably actual fighting with Indians.

Sitting Bull refused to make a treaty with the Government, and would not come in to live on a reservation. Besides his constant attacks on the white settlers, driving back even the most adventurous, he was incessantly invading and stealing from the land assigned to the peaceable Crows. They appealed for help to the Government that had promised to shield them.

We heard constantly at the Fort of the disaffection of the young Indians of the reservation, and of their joining the hostiles. We knew, for we had seen for ourselves, how admirably they were equipped. We even saw on a steamer touching at our landing its freight of Springfield rifles piled up on the docks en route for the Indians up the river. There was unquestionable proof that they came into the trading-posts far above us and bought them, while our own brave 7th Cavalry troopers were sent out with only the short-range carbines that grew foul after the second firing."

(Source: Boots and Saddles, the memoir of George Custer's widow, Elizabeth B. Custer)

Source 4:

"Close upon the intelligence of the check to General Crook's command on Rosebud river comes the news of a disaster on the Little Horn River so terrible and ghastly in its details that at the first announcement it was considered incredible or grossly exaggerated...

At the Rosebud, General Custer with twelve companies of cavalry, left Terry to make a detour around by the Little Horn. This was on the 22d of June. On the 25th he struck what was probably the main camp of Sitting Bull. He had pushed forward with greater rapidity than his orders directed, and arrived at the point where a junction of the forces was intended, a day or two in advance of the infantry. Without waiting for the rest of the troops to come up, General Custer decided upon an immediate attack. The Indians were posted in a narrow ravine, about

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twenty miles above the mouth of the river... The Indians poured a murderous fire upon them from all sides, and not one of the detachment escaped alive. General Custer himself, his two brothers, his brother-in-law, and his nephew were all killed...

A survey of the disastrous battle-ground disclosed a dreadful slaughter. Two hundred and seven men were buried in one place, and the total number of killed is estimated at three hundred and fifteen, including seventeen commissioned officers. The bodies of the dead were terribly mutilated. The Indians are supposed to have numbered from 2500 to 4000, and all the courage and skill displayed by our troops was of no avail against such overwhelming odds..."

(Source: Harper's Weekly, July 22, 1876, 598)

Source 5:

"The fate of the brave and gallant Custer has deeply touched the public heart, which sees only a fearless soldier leading a charge against an ambushed foe, and falling at the head of his men and in the thick of the fray. A monument is proposed, and subscriptions have been made. But a truer monument, more enduring than brass or marble, would be an Indian policy intelligent, moral, and efficient. Custer would not have fallen in vain if such a policy should be the result of his death. It is a permanent accusation of our humanity and ability that over the Canadian line the relations between Indians and whites are so tranquil, while upon our side they are summed up in perpetual treachery, waste, and war..."

(Source: Harper's Weekly, August 5, 1876, 630)

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Voices from the Plains Indians

Source 1:

"Little Bighorn was not the first meeting between the Cheyennes and Long Hair [General Custer]. Early in the winter of 1868, Long Hair and the Seventh Cavalry attacked our camp on the Washita River, killing Chief Black Kettle and his band, burning their tipis, and destroying all their food and belongings.

In the spring Long Hair promised peace and moved the Cheyenne to a reservation. When gold was discovered, white people came and the Indians were moved again. My brothers and I left for the open plains where our band of Cheyenne was again attacked by white soldiers in the winter of 1875. We were forced to seek help from a tribe of Sioux. We joined Sitting Bull and the Sioux and decided to travel and hunt together as one strong group. As conditions on the reservations became worse, more and more Indians moved west joining our group. Six tribes lived peacefully for several months, hunting buffalo, curing the meat for the winter months, and tanning buffalo hides. In the early summer, 1876 we set up camp near Little Bighorn River. Soldiers were spotted by some hunters to the south of the camp. Some young men went off to fight them and when they returned the next day they carried the bodies of several dead warriors with them. The chiefs then decided the group should move to the mouth of the river where there was plenty of game. On the first day of camp the peace was shattered when two boys ran into camp warning of soldiers. Then shooting could be heard. Women and children went to hide in the brush, some women carried away tipis and their belongings, others just ran with their children. Old men helped the young men to put on their war paint and dress. War ponies were brought into camp from the herds and the warriors mounted them and galloped away."

(Source: Kate Bighead, a Cheyenne Indian, told this story to Dr. Thomas Marquis in 1922. Dr. Marquis was a doctor and historian of the Battle of Little Bighorn in the 1920s. He interviewed and photographed Cheyenne Indians.)

Source 2:

"Soldiers built forts in our Powder River country when I was about thirty-two years old. The Sioux and the Cheyennes settled at the White River agency, in our favorite Black Hills country. This was to be our land forever, so we were pleased. But white people found gold in our lands [in 1874]. They crowded in, so we had to move out. My husband was angry about it, but he said the only thing we could do was go to other lands offered to us. We did this.



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Many Cheyennes and Sioux would not stay on the new reservations, but went back to the old hunting grounds in Montana. Soldiers were there to fight them. In the middle of the summer [1876] we heard that all of the soldiers [led by General George A. Custer] had been killed at the Little Bighorn River. My husband said that we should go and join our people there. We went, and all of our people spent the remainder of the summer there, hunting, not bothering any white people nor wanting to see any of them. When the leaves fell, the Cheyenne camp was located on a small creek far up the Powder River..."

(Source: Thomas B. Marquis, "Red Ripe's Squaw: Recollections of a Long Life," *Century Magazine*, 118 (June, 1929), 201-201, 206-207. Found in *Who Built America? Volume One: To 1877*.)

Source 3:

"In a recent interview with Major Crozier, Sitting Bull said: 'During the Summer previous to the one in which Custer attacked us, he sent a letter to me telling me that if I did not go to an agency he would fight me, and I sent word back to him by his messenger that I did not want to fight, but only to be left alone. I told him at the same time that if he wanted to fight that he should go and fight those Indians who wanted to fight him. Custer then sent me word again, (this was in the Winter.) 'You would not take my former offer, now I am going to fight you this Winter.' I sent word back that said just what I said before, that I did not want to fight, and only wanted to be left alone, and that my camp was the only one that had not fought against him.... I then saw that it was no use, that I would have to fight, so I sent him word back. 'All right; get all your men mounted and I will get all my men mounted: we will have a fight; the Great Spirit will look on, and the side that is in the wrong will be defeated.'"

(Source: *Interview with Sitting Bull. "The Death of General Custer," New York Times. May 7 1881.*)

Source 4:

"'Custer is not in this division; he is in the other.' I then ordered all my men to come on and attack the other division. They did so, and followed me. The soldiers of this division fired upon us as soon as we got within range, but did us little harm. When we had got quite close, and we were just going to charge them, a great storm broke right over us; the lightning was fearful, and struck a lot of the soldiers and horses, killing them instantly. I then called out to my men to charge the troops, and shouted out: 'The Great Spirit is on our side; look how he is striking the soldiers down.' My men saw this,

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and they all rushed upon the troops, who were mixed up a good deal. About 40 of the soldiers had been dismounted by the lightning, killing and frightening their horses, and these men were soon trampled to death. It was just at this time that we charged them, and we easily knocked them off their horses, and then killed them with our 'coup sticks.'

In this way we killed all this division with the exception of a few who tried to get away, who were killed by the Sioux before they could get very far. All through the battle the soldiers fired very wild and only killed 25 Sioux."

(Source: Interview with Sitting Bull. "The Death of General Custer." New York Times. May 7 1881.)

Source 5:

"I got on my horse, and rode out into my camp. I called out to the people all running about: 'I am Two Moons, your chief. Don't run away. Stay here and fight. You must stay and fight the white soldiers. I shall stay even if I am to be killed'

While I was sitting on my horse I saw flags come up over the hill to the east. Then the soldiers rose all at once, all on horses.... They formed into three bunches with a little ways between. Then a bugle sounded, and they all got off horses, and some soldiers led the horses back over the hill.

Then the Sioux rode up the ridge on all sides, riding very fast. The Cheyennes went up the left way. Then the shooting was quick, quick. Pop-pop-pop, very fast. Some of the soldiers were down on their knees, some standing. Officers all in front. The smoke was like a great cloud, and everywhere the Sioux went the dust rose like smoke. We circled all round him--swirling like water round a stone. We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop, and horses fall on them. Soldiers in line drop, but one man rides up and down the line--all the time shouting. He rode a sorrel horse with white face and white fore-legs. I don't know who he was. He was a brave man.

Indians kept swirling round and round, and the soldiers killed only a few. Many soldiers fell. At last all horses killed but five. Once in a while some man would break out and run toward the river, but he would fall. At last about a hundred men and five horsemen stood on the hill all bunched together. All along the bugler kept blowing his commands. He was very brave too.

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Next day four Sioux chiefs and two Cheyennes and I, Two Moons, went upon the battlefield to count the dead. One man carried a little bundle of sticks. When we came to dead men, we took a little stick and gave it to another man, so we counted the dead. There were 388. There were thirty-nine Sioux and seven Cheyennes killed, and about a hundred wounded. Some white soldiers were cut with knives, to make sure they were dead; and the war women had mangled some. Most were left just where they fell."

(Source: Two Moons. McClure's Magazine. September, 1898.)

Source 6:

"There was no dancing or celebrating of any kind in any of the camps that night. Too many people were in mourning, among all of the Sioux as well as among the Cheyennes. Too many Cheyenne and Sioux women had gashed their arms and legs, in token of their grief. The people generally were praying, not cheering. . . . Mourning families abandoned and left behind their meat, robes, cooking pots and everything else they owned, as well as their vacated or destroyed lodges. That was a custom among all of the Sioux tribes the same as with the Cheyennes. I saw several Sioux tepees left standing. I supposed there were dead warriors in some of them, or perhaps in all of them. Some Cheyenne tepees were left standing. These had belonged to families wherein a member had been killed. But, except the lodges and property abandoned by mourning people, all of the possessions of the Indians were taken with us. . . . Charcoal Bear, the medicine chief, had kept possession of the sacred buffalo head through all of our distress. We had now as good a medicine lodge for it as we ordinarily had. This lodge was at its usual place at the back part of the space within our horseshoe camp circle. All of the people had good lodges. In every way we were living yet according to our customary habits. We were not bothering any white people. We did not want to see any of them. We felt we were on our own land. We had killed only such people as had come for driving us away from it. So, our hearts were clean from any feeling of guilt."

(Source: Marquis, Thomas B. Interpreted. Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962 p. 256, 270, 294.)

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Class Debate Organizer:
Who really won the Battle of the Greasy Grass/Battle of the Little Bighorn,
and why does it matter?

With the other members of your group, use the sources you have analyzed to prepare "talking points" for a class debate. Focus on the following questions:

1. Why did the battle occur? Who was to blame?

2. Who was responsible for the defeat of the 7th Cavalry?

3. Did the US soldiers behave appropriately? What criteria should be used to answer this question?

4. Did the Indians behave appropriately? What criteria should be used to answer this question?

5. Who really won the Battle of the Greasy Grass/Battle of the Little Bighorn?