

## *Custer's Last Stand*

### *Program Transcript*

**Narrator:** The news flashed across telegraph wires on July 6th, 1876. George Armstrong Custer and 261 members of his 7th Cavalry had been massacred by Cheyenne and Lakota warriors, near a river called the Little Bighorn, in Montana Territory. There were no survivors.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** This was a thunderbolt. The West was won, how could this happen? It's like the sinking of the unsinkable Titanic, you know, it just doesn't compute.

**Narrator:** All across the nation -- in big cities and small towns, word of Custer's death was greeted with stunned disbelief.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** It's shocking; it's astonishing. It's not the way the script was written. It was not supposed to end that way.

**Narrator:** In Philadelphia, at the Centennial International Exhibition, an exuberant celebration of America's 100th birthday, was in full swing. As they marked their first century, Americans were in an expansive and optimistic mood. The nation had survived the Civil War, built a railroad across the continent, and was settling the vast spaces of the interior.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** It's two days after the happy birthday of America. A century of incredible progress and achievement has just been celebrated. And then comes news that Custer, this representative of the victorious military of the Civil War, of railroad building, of pushing back the frontier has been wiped out by a bunch of savages.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He embodied so much of America. And, and not just our good impulses, but very many of our worst impulses. Custer was cut down in his prime, in dramatic fashion. And it all adds up to the making of a myth.

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**Louis Warren, Historian:** There was a famous poster of Custer's Last Stand produced by Budweiser that was probably hung in every bar in America at one time. It shows white men surrounded by a dark horde, unwilling to surrender, white men willing to make the last sacrifice as they fend off this enemy.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** This became the way that Americans of a certain generation came to understand the American West and to have an image of what Custer's Last Stand meant.

**Ed Lilenthal, Historian:** For those of us who grew up in the 50s playing George Armstrong Custer it was incarnation of American courage and the pathos of a Last Stand. You have this individual figure on the hill, his men dead around him, because of course we all know Custer died last. And as with Errol Flynn -- with a bullet in the heart and then falls heroically to the ground. This was the way Americans expressed their courage, the way Americans died in wars.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He's the central figure in the last great battle of the Indian wars. He really incarnates one of the fundamental problems in American history. What do we really make of the progress that we made? What did it cost for the United States to become the country that it's become? What price was paid and who paid the price?

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** Standing on that battlefield on the highest point looking at that place, you can still feel it. You can still feel that battle. You can still feel the frightened, anger; everything you can feel is still there yet.

**Narrator:** On July 3rd, 1863, outside the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the fate of the Union Army, and the course of the Civil War, hung in the balance. On the third day of a climactic battle, confederate cavalry under Jeb Stuart -- the legendary gray horsemen known as "the Invincibles," -- threatened to overrun the Union's vulnerable right flank. As the overwhelmed Union forces began to fall back, only the veteran First Michigan Cavalry

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remained to counter-attack. At that moment, a figure came riding to the front of the Michigan lines, dressed in black velvet, his saber held high, yellow hair streaming in the wind -- it was the 23-year-old Brigadier General -- George Armstrong Custer.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** Custer, who's at the head of this charge turns around and shouts 'Come on you wolverines!' And it's a full speed charge. The horses are screaming as they slam into each other.

**Narrator:** "So sudden and violent was the collision," wrote one veteran, "that many of the horses were turned end over end and crushed their riders beneath them. The clashing of sabers, the firing of pistols, the demands for surrender, and cries of combatants, filled the air." When it was over, the Union lines had held, and Custer's wild charge had helped win the most decisive battle of the Civil War.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** There is a streak of either courage or foolhardiness, and you can take your pick. But there certainly is something there that does lead him to charge headlong into guns blazing. And it's a critical moment in the Union victory at Gettysburg. It was a giant risk and he took it and it paid off.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer in a battle was, was a thing of beauty. He, he could direct people with precision, never get rattled. I mean he just had a sense of physical courage that was inspiring. And that's a real gift when you're out there in the chaos of war. And Custer had it.

**Narrator:** "Oh, could you but have seen some of the charges that we made!" he wrote to a friend. "While thinking of them I cannot but exclaim, 'Glorious War!'"

**Narrator:** George Custer was the first-born son of a blacksmith turned farmer from New Rumley, Ohio. From an early age it was clear he was a boy determined to transcend his lowly origins, and his self-confidence so impressed his Congressman that, despite his lack of qualifications, he won a coveted spot at West Point in 1857.

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**Paul Hutton, Historian:** West Point offered a marvelous opportunity for a young man like Custer to rise socially. Here was a way to distance himself from the community he had grown up with -- he always wanted to be more. He really always had a sense that he wanted to be great. He wanted to be famous. He wanted to make his mark in the world. West Point is going to provide him with that opportunity. That is of course if he can manage to get through West Point.

**Narrator:** Custer excelled at all the skills necessary for a promising career in the cavalry, but when he was out of his saddle, he was in a state of perpetual rebellion against authority.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** He lives on the edge. He has a tremendous desire to fit in, but also to play with the margins. He wants to stand out. He's a risk-taker. He's a daredevil.

**Narrator:** By the time of his graduation from West Point, in June of 1861, Custer's insubordination had helped him compile a record of infractions never before equaled in the history of the academy.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer would finish last in his class. But he wasn't stupid by any means. Whenever he was running into serious trouble he'd hunker down and work his way back. And so in one sense, he led a chaotic, fun-filled life, but on the other there was a real discipline there.

**Narrator:** Although Custer was fresh out of West Point when the war began, his exploits on the battlefield proved that he was more than ready for command.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He's a guy who sees his chance to rise during the war. And he recognizes that the only way he, the only capital he has is his life. He's got to put himself in a post of danger if he wants to distinguish himself. And so he does. He's on the firing line with his troops. He gets horses shot out from under him and he dresses so that he's a mark for any

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sniper on the field. He's got a huge sombrero with a feather in the cap. He's got a big scarlet neckerchief. He's got a velvet jacket with gold braid. He's asking for it.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Custer didn't just look the part; he acted the part. He never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself. In the bloodiest war in all of American history, he's in the thick of the fighting from the first battle to the last battle. And he's barely scratched. It's just absolutely remarkable. 'Custer's luck,' he called it and he came to believe in it.

**Narrator:** Cited for bravery in his very first engagement, at the Battle of Bull Run, Custer distinguished himself in a string of brilliant cavalry actions that made the dashing young officer a darling of the nation's press. The *New York Tribune* proclaimed, "Future writers of fiction will find in Brigadier General Custer most of the qualities which go to make up a first-class hero." The men of his Michigan Brigade, many of them twice his age, idolized Custer, following him into some of the war's most violent engagements, proudly sporting the bright red neckties that he wore.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** The Civil War was a time that called for Custer's brand of leadership. Somebody who was daring and brash and inspiring to the people who fought underneath him.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** Remember, on a Civil War battlefield everything is visual. He has to be a great actor. He has to get out in front of his men and perform courage.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** And that image of Custer, not at the back, but at the front, with his sword out, that's the Custer that put him on the cover of *Harper's Weekly* and that everybody came to associate him with.

**Narrator:** Now, with his triumph at the Battle of Gettysburg, Custer had become one of the most famous officers of the war. He was known as 'The Boy General.' He stayed on the front lines until the very last day of the conflict, receiving the flag of truce when General Robert E.

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Lee finally surrendered at Appomattox, on April 9th, 1865. Custer's most admiring commander, Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, gave him the table upon which the peace terms were signed, along with a note to Custer's wife Libbie. "...permit me to say, Madam," it read, "that there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your gallant husband."

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** One of the things that's remarkable about Custer is the number of photographs that are made of him. He understood that there was a new kind of visual imagery at work in society and that it could be manipulated.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** Custer's costumes and his long cascading hair, right, all that cavalier look. What's he playing into there? Well partly he's drawing on popular literature. And he's drawing on the legend of the Knight-errant and the cavalier. And he kind of mixes them all together to come up with this figure.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He grows his hair long and perfumes his hair with cinnamon oil. And he takes pride in his girlish good-looks and his fine complexion. And I think one of the things that makes him so prominent as a figure is the success with which he mingles this feminine, masculine, gentleman, roughneck combination and brings it off.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** There are men who look at him at the time and think, this guy looks like a circus performer. There are people who look at Custer and say, what a freak. But most of the time it's working for him. Just about every public figure in the late 19th century had to have some kind of theatrical persona, Custer had a profoundly theatrical sensibility. He had a way of arriving that everyone would see and would pay attention.

**Narrator:** During the months following the surrender at Appomattox, Custer would find peace more challenging than war. He had won a battlefield commission to Major General of Volunteers, but was now a lowly Captain in the regular army.

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**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** In this post-war army it's shrunk from an army of, at the end of the war it was something like a million and a half men under arms to what, 30,000, something like that. The officer corps is shrunk way down. And nobody's going to get promoted. People are going to spend 30 years at whatever rank they happen to be in.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He was not leading men to war for a good cause anymore. The military was being downsized dramatically. During the Civil War there was a battle it seemed every day, I mean a pace of life that just could not be sustained. And suddenly it was over. He was at sea.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** He really just doesn't know what to do. And so he turns to the one person that he actually counts on the most, the person that has the most influence over him, the person who really is the bedrock upon which he stands and that is his wife, Elizabeth Bacon Custer.

**Actor, reading words of Libbie Custer:** Oh Autie, we must die together. Better the humblest life together than the loftiest, divided.

**Actor, reading words of George Custer:** Need I repeat to my darling that while living she is my all, and if Destiny wills me to die, my last prayer will be for her, my last breath will speak her name and that Heaven will not be Heaven till we are joined together.

**Narrator:** They had first met in the small town of Monroe, Michigan, where Custer had come as a boy of 14 to live with his half-sister and attend school at the Stebbins Academy. He had returned in the fall of 1862, a dashing 23-year old Captain on the staff of General George McClellan, and one of Monroe's most eligible bachelors. Three years younger than Custer, she was known as Libbie, the radiant and sophisticated only daughter of Monroe's prominent Judge, Daniel Bacon. She was also one of the most sought-after girls at the Young Ladies' Seminary.

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**Louise Barnett, Historian:** Libbie was not immediately impressed by Custer when they first met, but he was so persistent. He told her that he had vowed to marry her from the get-go, and he just kept at it and even though her father disapproved, she ultimately was won over, by the fact that she seemed to be the supreme thing for Custer in his life.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** She was a catch. And she was pretty too and, and very bright. And I think that would have appealed to Custer. They had a, a real passionate relationship that both of them idealized.

**Actor, reading words of Libbie Custer:** Oh how dear he is. I love him so. His words linger in my ears, his kisses on my lips. I forget everything sometimes when I think of him... If loving with one's whole soul is insanity I am ripe for an insane asylum.

**Shirley Leckie, Historian:** The two of them put forth this image of the cavalier and his lady, which is very pleasing, to Libbie, because she doesn't want a mundane life, she wants a life of excitement.

**Narrator:** Custer's astonishing rise through the ranks swept aside whatever reservations Judge Bacon may have had about the match, and the couple were married on February 9th, 1864. After a brief honeymoon, Custer was called back to duty. His new wife headed straight to the front to be with him.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Libbie, contrary to almost all army officers' wives wants to be there. So she is in many instances in a tent or in a house very near where the fighting is occurring. And this is a pattern that they would keep to throughout Custer's life. She was in her own way a very charismatic, stalwart figure.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** There was a sense that his career was a joint project between the two of them. I think Libbie saw in Custer a kind of aspiration to greatness and she wanted to be a part of that.

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**Narrator:** When the fighting forced them apart, they wrote to one another incessantly, in letters that sometimes ran 20 pages or more. He called her "My Rosebud," or "My Darling Sunbeam," or sometimes "My Little Durl." She called him "Autie," a childhood rendering of his middle name, Armstrong, or "Dear Old Standby," or sometimes just "Beau" and from the onset, they saw their lives as inseparable from one another.

**Actor, reading words of George Custer:** When I think of how successful I have been of late and how much has been said of my conduct and gallantry I think, "She will hear of it, and will be proud of her Boy!"

**Actor, reading words of Libbie Custer:** Remember, I cannot love as I do without my life blending with yours. I would not lose my individuality, but would be, as a wife should be, part of her husband, a life within a life. I was never an admirer of a submissive wife, but I wish to look to my husband as superior in judgment and experience and to be guided by him in all things.

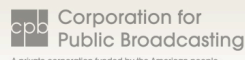
**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** They had a true partnership. She did everything she could to, to promote her husband because she really felt that he had something to offer and, and you know that he was making history.

**Narrator:** Finally, in the fall of 1866, Custer received an offer to join the 7th Cavalry, a new regiment being mustered out to the Southern Plains of Kansas and Oklahoma.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** He gets promoted to lieutenant colonel within the regular army. And he's able to really act as a major force in shaping this regiment. And that becomes his salvation.

**Narrator:** In mid-October, 1866, George and Libbie, their cook Eliza, and Custer's pack of staghounds, arrived at Fort Riley, in northeastern Kansas. By then, the western frontier was awash in conflict. As railroads continued to push further west, and new waves of settlers followed in their wake, the clashes with Indians on the Northern and Southern Plains had

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intensified. Eastern reformers in the Indian Bureau promoted a policy of tolerance and accommodation towards the tribes, while westerners demanded their subjugation, if not outright extermination. Like most army officers, Custer had to operate under this contradictory policy, and now he and the 7th Cavalry, serving under Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, were charged with chasing down Cheyenne and Lakota bands that had been raiding the new settlements along the Kansas frontier.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** Custer goes out to the Indian frontier. It's really the only active theater of operations. The struggle he gets involved with has been called Hancock's war. And it's botched from the start.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** This isn't like the Confederates. The Sioux and the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, they don't know the histories of say, Napoleon Bonaparte's armies and they don't care. Custer camps on top of hills so that he has a view of the countryside. Builds big fires. Well the first thing that happens is the enemy sees him and goes away. What he doesn't realize is he's fighting what we have come to know as a guerrilla war. It's not that he doesn't have courage to show, it's that he doesn't have a place to show it in, because he can't find the enemy and display the courage the way he's used to.

**Narrator:** Hancock's campaign dragged on for an entire summer, and an increasingly restless Custer endured a series of fruitless skirmishes, inconclusive negotiations, and miserable rain that mired his troops in thick mud.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** Custer is frustrated; it's a wild goose chase. It's a mismanaged campaign. He's getting nowhere; he misses his wife. He's not very happy.

**Louise Barnett, Historian:** The conditions are just so different for him. The soldiers are not of the caliber that he's used to, it's a much smaller field of endeavor; he's distracted by having been apart from Libbie for a long period of time. And I think all of these things together cause him to go off the rails.

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**Narrator:** While a depressed Libbie waited for their return to Fort Riley, Custer's mood darkened, and morale amongst his men plummeted. During one particularly brutal march along the Republican River, desertion from his regiment became so brazen that one group of men left camp in broad daylight. Enraged, Custer ordered the soldiers tracked down and told Major Joel Elliott he wanted him to "bring none in alive." Several of the deserters were killed, and others badly wounded. On July 13th, 1867, Custer's column limped into camp near Fort Wallace. Before his exhausted troops had time to recover, Custer suddenly ordered four officers, and 72 men to accompany him on a punishing 150-mile march to Fort Riley, lasting 55 straight hours.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** He gets word that Libbie has arrived at a fort, which is quite some distance away, and force marches his men at an incredible rate in order to get back to her. And some of the men who can't keep up, whose horses become lame, are left behind. At least one is killed by Indians, others are wounded.

**Narrator:** The couple spent only 24 hours together, before Custer returned to his command, but an outraged General Hancock saw to it that Custer was court-martialed for abandoning his regiment and ordering deserters shot without trial.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** It's a very strange moment in Custer's career. Custer was impulsive; he was a risk-taker. But he was also ambitious and this was probably the most dangerous thing he ever did to his career.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He seems to have lost control. And to have just bolted from a situation that for all kinds of reasons he found intolerable.

**Narrator:** At Fort Leavenworth, Custer vigorously defended his actions, charge by charge. He was found guilty on all counts, suspended from his rank and command, and denied pay for a year.

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**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** For Libbie, the circumstances of this court-martial were truly romantic. It was Armstrong coming back to her and she, she said that you know, after this long march to her, they would have that one perfect day.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** I believe that she embraced that moment so much because it proved to her that she was more important than the army. He's throwing away his entire career, and he has to know it, to be with her. And so on a personal level Custer's ride is an affirmation of their love. On a professional level it's catastrophic.

**Narrator:** Custer's first Indian campaign had ended in almost total failure -- he had been unable to find, let alone fight, most of the Indian troublemakers, his discipline problems had left his regiment deeply divided, and his own career now lay in ruins. Libbie vigorously defended her husband. "When he ran the risk of a court-martial... he did it expecting the consequences," she wrote to a friend back home, "and we are quite determined not to live apart again, even if he leaves the army otherwise so delightful to us." General Sheridan hosted the couple at Fort Leavenworth for several months, but eventually they returned to a long, hot summer back in Monroe. George and Libbie still had each other, but it seemed as though the vaunted run of 'Custer's Luck' had finally run out.

**Narrator:** In July of 1868, after a dispute with a corrupt Indian agent, Cheyenne warriors attacked the white settlements along the Kansas frontier, killing 15 men and raping five women. Within weeks the entire region was once again engulfed in violence. Determined to bring the Indians to heel, Generals Sherman and Sheridan resolved to use the tactics that had defeated the Confederacy against the Indians of the West.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The thought was that if we went in the winter, when the Cheyenne were forced to stay in their winter camps, we could capture them. What Sheridan is doing is bringing the war to the Cheyenne in a way that had never been done before.

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**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Indians raided in the spring and the summer. When the grass was high, their ponies were fat. During the winter, they hunkered down in secluded camps, usually on rivers or streams. They had always been protected by the enormous distance of the West from their foes. But now Sheridan felt that his well-supplied troopers could hunt the Indians down in their winter camps. This is ruthless war. You destroy the will of the people. You impoverish them, you bring pestilence upon them, and break them.

**Narrator:** While Sheridan got ready to put his bold new plan into action, George and Libbie were still stuck in Monroe, and Custer's career was at a standstill.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He's in serious difficulty, financially speaking. He's earning a little bit of money by writing for hunting magazines, outdoor kind of magazines. The pay is pretty much all he has to live on. He's gone from being major general of volunteers, now he's not only lieutenant colonel of his regiment, he's a suspended lieutenant colonel of his regiment. Whatever glory is being won, is being won by other people.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Libbie and George are, are languishing in Monroe, Michigan. There's still several months left on the, the year unpaid leave when Custer gets a telegram from Sheridan, who is leading a new kind of campaign against the Cheyenne. Custer is called back and thus begins the new chapter of his, his career in the West.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Sheridan knows that he can count on Custer to do the nasty, dirty, really unpleasant business that is Indian warfare. He knew Custer had the vigor, the energy and the ambition to accomplish what was needed.

**Narrator:** On November 23rd, 1868, Custer and his 7th Cavalry left their base called Camp Supply in western Oklahoma, and marching through heavy snow and bitter cold, set out in search of Indians. Three days later they struck the trail of a war party heading south and followed it until it led to a Cheyenne village along the banks of the Washita River. Custer had no idea how many Indians were in the camp, or whether they were in fact the hostile warriors

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he was seeking, but he was determined to attack. In the darkness, he divided his regiment into four detachments, and had them quietly surround the village. Then, Custer ordered his men to wait in the freezing cold for dawn.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** The tracks lead straight into the village of Chief Black Kettle who was renowned as a peace chief among the Cheyenne. And Custer, following the tracks, decides to attack the village.

**Narrator:** At first light, with temperatures so cold the instruments froze to the musicians' lips, Custer instructed his band to strike up his favorite song, *Garry Owen*. "At last the inspiring strains of this rollicking tune broke forth," one Lieutenant remembered, "On rushed these surging cavalcades from all directions, a mass of Uncle Sam's cavalry thirsty for glory..."

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** You ride into the village in the snow, you're shooting anything that moves. You're shooting women, you're shooting children. You're shooting old people. You're shooting people who are shooting at you. You're shooting people who are running away. You're shooting people who are trying to surrender. It's a madhouse. And a lot people in Black Kettle's village are killed, including Black Kettle himself.

**Narrator:** The battle was over in minutes. One hundred three Indians lay dead, a handful were warriors, but many more were old men, women and children.

**Phil Deloria, Historian:** To attack at dawn, to attack a village that's full of a few warriors, a lot of women, a lot of children, and to kill indiscriminately, as often happens in these battles, right. I mean this is a new kind of warfare and, and it reflects contempt for Indian people as human beings. And Custer's right there at the heart of it.

**Narrator:** Five of Custer's men were killed, and a dozen wounded in the mayhem.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** What Custer doesn't realize is that this village is actually an outlier and that just down the river are a series of villages holding many more Cheyenne

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and Arapaho Indians than he expected. By the end of the day, those Indians are starting to come up river and see where the 7th Cavalry is. Custer then has to get out of the Washita safely and quickly. So he marshals his men and they start to ride off toward those other villages. It's a feint and a fake and it works. The warriors who've been surrounding them go back to protect their villages. Under cover of darkness, Custer then doubles back his men and they start heading back north, toward Fort Supply. It's actually probably one of Custer's most brilliant military maneuvers.

**Narrator:** As they approached the fort, Custer arranged his column as if in a parade, his Osage scouts in the lead, singing their war songs, followed by 53 captive Cheyenne women and children, escorted by the 7th Cavalry, in formation, their rifles and sabers glinting in the sun. But the celebration was dampened by the news that not all of the members of the regiment had returned safely. Major Joel Elliott and his company were missing and presumed dead. In the midst of the battle, Elliott and his men had set off in pursuit of some Cheyenne warriors, and disappeared. In danger of being surrounded, and with darkness approaching, Custer had refused to search for them. Their mutilated bodies were discovered several weeks later. Some members of the 7th believed Custer had deserted Elliott and his men, and never forgave him. Foremost amongst Custer's detractors was the regimen's senior captain, Frederick Benteen.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** He feels that Elliott and his men were abandoned in the field and that this is unforgivable. He feels that Custer is mostly about theatrics and that he will stop at nothing to advance his own career, even getting his own men killed.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He thought Custer was pushing the envelope way too hard. And this really got stuck in Benteen's craw.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** He felt Custer had deserted Elliott at the Washita. And Benteen was totally embittered by this. This caused a rift not only between Benteen and Custer but really

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a rift in the entire regiment. The desertion of Elliott at the Washita would haunt the regiment all the way to Little Bighorn.

**Narrator:** Some newspapers back east claimed Custer was responsible for an Indian massacre, but his triumphant version of events would rule the day.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Custer is hailed as the greatest Indian fighter on the plains. Here is the first successful blow against the Plains tribes by the United States Army. And Custer and the 7th Cavalry are praised throughout the East.

**Ed Lilenthal, Historian:** In many ways, the Washita establishes Custer as an Indian fighter, and this is his, his next incarnation as a warrior from, from the Civil War general. And is a very important weigh station on his way to celebrity status in the culture.

**Narrator:** It was "the hardest fought and bloodiest Indian battle which has taken place on the continent during many a year," proclaimed the *New York Times*, "one or two repetitions of Custer's victory will give us peace on the Plains." Despite the loss of Elliott and his men, Custer's exploits at what had become known as the "Battle of the Washita" had made him famous once more, this time as a hero of the American frontier.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer's salvation would be the West. It would be the Plains where he could ride his horse as fast as he had ever done in a cavalry charge during the Civil War. It was a new land of exoticism, of discovery, of danger.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** One of the reasons the frontier is such a powerful myth is it's about possibility and self-making. The West was a story that everybody who belonged to the United States proper could agree upon. It was a story about nation-building and national expansion. Custer understood the West was where the next big drama was.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He clearly thought he was destined for greatness. He, he truly felt that all he wanted to be was great, to be remembered for all

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time. Custer had emerged from the ashes of a court-martial, created a stunning victory, at least in his own telling, and now the future was his.

**Narrator:** The story was quickly passed from band to band throughout the Northern Plains. Along the banks of the Yellowstone River in Montana, a group of warriors had reached a standoff with a surveying party for the Northern Pacific railroad. Suddenly a chief named Sitting Bull called out, "Whoever wishes to smoke with me, come," and began walking towards the enemy's lines. Four of his men joined him, and sat down to smoke, with bullets whizzing all around them. "He just sat and looked around and smoked peacefully," his nephew White Bull remembered, while others puffed furiously on the pipe, "their hearts beating fast." When it was done, with bullets kicking up dust by his feet, Sitting Bull methodically cleaned out his pipe with a stick, then walked slowly back to his people. White Bull called it "the bravest deed possible."

**Narrator:** He was the leader of the Hunkpapa band of the Teton Sioux, or Lakota, and he was renowned as a warrior and for visions that had the power of prophecy.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** Sitting Bull's power, his rise to power comes from spirituality. And he had tremendous visions. And I really believe looking at Sitting Bull, looking into his eyes, I think you can see it.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Sitting Bull led by example. He had a history of bravery. He had the charisma and he had a spirituality. He embodied for the Lakota the kind of person they needed at a point when they were facing cataclysmic change in their lives, when presented with the challenge of white civilization.

**Narrator:** A few months before Custer's battle at the Washita, in 1868, the Fort Laramie Treaty had created the Great Sioux Reservation, which encompassed most of the modern-day state of South Dakota, as well as millions of acres of hunting grounds to the west and north, including the Black Hills.

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**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** The Black Hills was a breath of life for the Lakota. Not only was it a place to get food, it was a place of extreme holiness... it was a place where they would be born, a place where they would live, they would die, that they much respected. A whole lot of sacred areas in the Black Hills. It was their backbone, it was a place that was their creation.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Sitting Bull coined the phrase, the "food pack," to think about the Black Hills, something you carry with you on a journey where you hold some kind of reserves for yourself. The Black Hills were those reserves for them.

**Narrator:** By the terms of the treaty, these lands had been granted to the Sioux forever, and in return, they were supposed to cease their hostilities against the Americans, and live peacefully, accepting rations from the government at offices known as agencies on the reservation. The majority of the tribe had followed this course, but Sitting Bull had remained defiant, refusing to even acknowledge the treaty, let alone sign it. He and his followers, whom General Philip Sheridan branded as "hostiles," traveled with the buffalo herds as they always had, frequently clashing with railroad workers and white settlers, stirring up trouble on the reservations, and luring Indians away from the agencies every summer to hunt buffalo.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Sitting Bull and his people simply refused to come into the agencies. They were conservatives. Conservatives, socially. Conservatives, spiritually. They were determined to adhere to an old way of life.

**Narrator:** Sitting Bull had nothing but scorn for the Sioux who had chosen life on the reservations. "You are fools to make yourself slaves to a piece of fat bacon, some hard tack and a little sugar and coffee," he said. "The whites may get me at last... but I will have good times till then." For the moment Sitting Bull remained defiant -- a symbol of resistance for his people -- but in the mind of General Sheridan, a day of reckoning was fast approaching.

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**Narrator:** During the years of Sitting Bull's ascent, Custer was doing everything he could to keep himself in the public eye. He organized celebrity buffalo hunts on the Kansas plains, led a railroad surveying expedition deep into Lakota territory, and wrote a series of articles about his exploits for *The Galaxy* magazine. Then, on a wintry evening in November of 1873, the Custers' arrived at their new post -- Fort Abraham Lincoln, in Dakota Territory. After being broken up and assigned to peacekeeping duties all across the South, the 7th Cavalry was at last being reunited to project American power onto the Northern Plains. Fort Lincoln was to serve as the regiment's, and the Custers', first real home. Perched on high ground, on the western shore of the Missouri River, just south of the town of Bismarck, the fort was built to help protect the crews on the Northern Pacific railroad.

**Actor, reading words of Libbie Custer:** In the dim light I could see the great post of Fort Lincoln, where only a few months before we had left a barren plain. Our quarters were lighted, and as we approached, the regimental band played "Home, Sweet Home," followed by the general's favorite, *Garry Owen*. The general had completely settled the house... but he had kept this fact a secret, as a surprise. Our friends had lighted it all, and built fires in the fireplaces... It seemed too good to believe that the 7th Cavalry had a post of its own."

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He and Libbie have a nice headquarters. They entertain. They have musical evenings. They have theatrical evenings. They provide amusement and a social life for, for the officers who were serving under them at the fort. They're glamorous and they're sociable. They're celebrities. It's a very happy time.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Part of the beauty of this little utopia was that it was a family utopia. He had reinvented in many ways the circumstances under which he grew up. His younger brother, Tom, was there, and then his sister, Maggie, married Lieutenant Calhoun. Boston Custer, the youngest of the Custer brothers would join them. And so this truly became a, a Custer enclave in the Northern Plains of North Dakota.

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**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer liked being surrounded by people who loved him. It was like a little microcosm of society and Custer was at the center of it.

**Narrator:** Not everyone in the 7th Cavalry was welcomed into Custer's charmed circle -- what one new lieutenant dismissed as the "Royal Family." Officers with little tolerance for Custer's narcissism -- like Frederick Benteen, and the senior officer of the regiment, Major Marcus Reno -- were banished to more distant outposts in the territory. But if the divisions within the 7th bothered Custer, he didn't let it show. "One was permitted to receive the courtesies of the happiest home I ever saw," one visitor enthused, "where perfect love and confidence reigned."

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Libbie's ambition was equal to Custer's. But you had to be a little more indirect if you were a woman in the 19th century. And so she saw her project as her husband. Libbie was more politically astute. Had a better social IQ. Could read people. Custer was Custer. He could read things in the middle of battle, but when it came to every day encounters he could really miss it. And so Libbie was there often saying, now wait a minute George, now you sure you want to say that; they were truly the power couple of their day.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** George and Libbie Custer, they were young, they were beautiful. They were childless. And I think the assumption was there would be children. And that was not to be.

**Narrator:** Although Libbie in particular yearned for a large family, both she and George eventually tried to make a virtue out of their circumstances. "How troublesome and embarrassing babies would be to us," George comforted Libbie, "Our pleasure would be continually marred and circumscribed."

**Louis Warren, Historian:** They seemed to have this kind of domestic aura about them. In reality, behind the scenes there are plenty of indications there was trouble in that marriage.

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He loved playing cards and gambling. He loved risk. And one can speculate that it wasn't all that easy a marriage, some of the time at least.

**Narrator:** During his frequent trips to New York and Washington, Custer made no secret of his nights on the town, often in the company of socialites and opera stars.

**Louise Barnett, Historian:** He is always writing in his letters from New York about other women that he spent time with. He seems to have, I would call, a childish need, to show that other women admire him, and to parade this before his wife.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** They were separated for the Christmas season of 1869, we don't really know why. We do know that George sent Libbie a letter saying, effectively, I wish you wouldn't be so angry, she means nothing to me.

**Shirley Leckie, Historian:** Sometimes she wouldn't write him at all, and then he would be begging for letters. The low point of their marriage was in December 1870, Custer was alone and they would spend Christmas apart for the second year in a row and he wrote a long, contrite letter to Libbie. And he promised never to play cards again, but he also went on to talk about inexcusable behavior on his part and that he was afraid that he had ruined the very best relationship that he'd ever had. I think the reconciliations were highly emotional, highly romantic. I think the two of them needed each other.

**Narrator:** On July 2nd, 1874, as his band played the regimental battle song *Garry Owen*, Custer and the 7th Cavalry set out west from Fort Lincoln on an expedition to the Black Hills. Libbie was not with them. "At the very last, news came through Indian scouts that the summer might be full of danger," she recalled, "and my heart was almost broken at finding that the general did not dare take me with him." The expedition's stated purpose was to scout a new location for a fort, so that Sheridan could exert more control over the so-called "hostiles" that ranged across the reservation. Publicly the United States government continued to support the Lakota's rights to the Black Hills. Privately, however, Washington was

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determined to provoke a conflict with Sitting Bull and unleash a rush of white settlement that would render the Fort Laramie treaty meaningless.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** Everybody knows that this is an expedition whose purpose is to get the public interested in seizing the Black Hills. Custer is there not just to explore the Black Hills, he's there to publicize the discovery.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** It's a tremendous affair. One thousand soldiers, 110 wagons. There are 70 Indian scouts. There are geologists, botanists. Four newspaper reporters. And probably the most important people of all, two miners who are there to search for whatever minerals might happen to be there. The Black Hills expedition could not have been better tailored for Custer's talents. It was like a circus and Custer was the ringmaster. This was a big stage for him and he took advantage of it.

**Narrator:** Over the next few weeks, as the huge wagon train moved south and east through the Black Hills, Custer was everywhere at once.

**Actor, reading words of George Custer:** My Darling Sunbeam -- Your dear Beau can't send a very long letter, tho with volumes to say... After dinner when we reach camp, I usually take an escort to search out a few miles of road for the following day, and when I return I am ready to hasten to my comfortable -- but Oh so lonely -- bed. Reveille regularly at quarter to three... Breakfast at four. In the saddle at five. We have discovered a rich and beautiful country.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer is somebody who's, has a kind of restless energy that can't be contained. So this expedition was perfect for him because it gave him all of the opportunities for him to pursue his various interests and hobbies and to do so in front of a very watchful eye of reporters who had come along for the journey.

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**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He was teaching himself taxidermy and collecting specimens that were then being sent to some of the major repositories throughout the country.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** He shoots a bear and then has a photograph of himself taken in this buckskin outfit. In a way, presenting himself as a kind of frontier hero to a public that had grown up on the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, that photograph was really powerful. And Custer's using the Black Hills expedition as a kind of stage for himself, to build his public reputation.

**Narrator:** Throughout their nearly four weeks in the Black Hills, the men saw surprisingly little sign of hostile Indians, and gradually the expedition took on the air of a picnic.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He describes the Black Hills as earth's paradise. There's a wonderful scene where he describes the cavalymen riding through meadows of wildflowers and grasses that come up so high that the, the horses are like wading through them.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Throughout the expedition Custer writes official reports that he knows are going to be quoted heavily in newspapers. So the newspapers on the east coast and Chicago are quoting from him extensively. It puts Custer back on the front pages. And of course the headline that lands Custer on the tip of every tongue is of one four-letter word, gold.

**Narrator:** The first glint in the surveyors' pans had turned up at French Creek on July 30th, 1874. "From the grassroots down it was pay dirt," proclaimed the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, while the *Bismarck Tribune* announced that Custer's discovery "bids fair to become the El Dorado of America."

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** Custer has a great phrase, he says, "we found gold among the roots of the grass." And he creates this image in that phrase that you just go there, you're a

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farmer, right, you're going to just plow up the land. You're going to plow up the land. First you dig up the gold, you put the gold in the bank, then you put your wheat in the ground.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** It's 1874 when the news hits the public that there's gold in the Black Hills. And this is a time of depression in the United States. And so those men who, and some women who can outfit themselves get their equipment and head to the Black Hills to mine for gold. The position of the U.S. government is that miners are going to invade that country and there's going to be a war with Indians and that is inevitable.

**Narrator:** Custer arrived back at Fort Lincoln on August 30th, 1874, amidst a flood of positive press about his expedition. But William Curtis, the correspondent for the *New York World*, had a premonition about the journey. "We are goading the Indians to madness by invading their hallowed grounds," he wrote before the expedition set off, "and throwing open to them the avenues leading to a terrible revenge..."

**Louis Warren, Historian:** When Custer's out on the Plains, he's writing a column for a sportsman's magazine, about hunting. And he takes a penname, Nomad, he calls himself. And this is the period when he starts to think about and talk about his enemies, Indian enemies and saying, if I were an Indian, I would want to be with the men who are today fighting me. I would want the free, open, wandering life. He embodies and exhibits this, this kind of weird polarity, this weird conflict in the way Americans think of Indians.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer had kind of a tortured relationship with native peoples. He identified with them very strongly, prided himself in his knowledge of their rituals and, and lifestyle. And so that at one point he's embracing them, and in many ways imitating them, But on the other side, he was part of white civilization and saw them as a primitive race that were going to eventually melt into the shadows. Violence is such a central part of this story where through this violent dispossession of the native peoples we can create our destiny. That is a tortured legacy. That is something that it's hard to feel

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proud of and good about when you're defeating a people with whom you have no issue except for the fact that they're in the way.

**Narrator:** By the fall of 1875, just over a year after Custer's expedition to the Black Hills, more than 15,000 miners had flooded into the region, establishing the towns of Custer and Deadwood. The government had offered to buy the Black Hills for \$6 million, but the Lakota had turned them down.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Elements from Sitting Bull's camps come down and threaten to kill any chief that touches pen to paper... The government has continually made treaties with Indians and usually you can adhere to them for at least you know ten or twenty years, at least a generation, and well now, gold in the Black Hills means that we're going to have to abrogate this treaty a little quicker.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The government's interest in the Black Hills would in a sense play into Sitting Bull's hands. He was really looking for a way to pull his people together in the face of this threat coming from the east.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Sitting Bull has decided that he will not negotiate with the United States government... And he continues to recruit Indians who want to come out with him during the summer and hunt. He's trying to gather a kind of Lakota resistance to this incursion.

**Narrator:** Finally, on November 3rd, President Ulysses Grant convened a meeting of his top cabinet officers and generals to discuss the administration's Indian policy. Still handcuffed by the terms of the Fort Laramie treaty, but determined to eliminate one of the last pockets of Indian resistance in the West, Grant and his generals made two fateful decisions. They would do nothing to prevent white miners from flooding into the Black Hills. And they issued an ultimatum: any Lakota or Cheyenne that refused to come in to the agencies by the end of January, 1876, would be considered hostile, and the army would be used to bring them in.

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**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Sheridan would later look to this as almost a good joke, this insistence that they come into the reservations through all this heaping snow of the Northern Plains winter was patently ridiculous. What they were doing was forcing the issue, was creating a dirty little war that would serve the agenda of American imperialism. There's really no other way to look at it. It was a calculated strategy to force the Lakota to sell the Black Hills.

**Narrator:** Custer was the natural choice to lead such an operation, and it couldn't have come at a better time. At 36, he was no longer a young man, and while most of his energy was focused on winning another victory against the Indians -- one that he hoped would garner him a coveted promotion to Brigadier General -- he and Libbie would spend much of the winter of 1875 on the East Coast, looking for other ways to secure their future.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer is still trying to figure out what's next. So he's in New York, he's trying to meet with important people.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** He's hobnobbing with rich people, actors and actresses. This is the society he moves in, the society of wealth, refinement, power. And yet he feels outside of it. Despite his fame and despite all the glory that he had won in his brief lifetime, it hadn't led to any kind of financial security. And he wants that financial security that will come with some money in his pocket, because you can't eat fame.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** He tells Libbie his ideal in life is to go back to New York, become a rich man and have a mansion on Fifth Avenue.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** He's looking for business deals. He was a terrible businessman, but he always thought that maybe the next one would be his chance to make it big. And unfortunately he's also gambling and he's losing a lot of money that way.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He's in financial trouble he's been investing in risky stock options and silver mines that are unprofitable. And he's on the brink of financial

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ruin. The Black Hills expedition is a couple of years in the past and nothing much has been happening.

**Narrator:** Custer pinned his hopes on a lucrative lecture tour he had arranged with the Redpath Speakers Bureau. "When I tell you the terms you will open your eyes," he wrote to his brother Tom in January. "...They urged me to commence this spring, but I declined, needing more time for preparation." Then, in late March, while readying his regiment for the coming campaign, Custer was called to Washington. He appeared in front of a congressional committee trying to discredit the Grant administration's handling of contracts at Indian Agencies on the frontier. Custer's testimony was mostly hearsay, but he did manage to accuse the President's brother Orville of influence peddling.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Grant is furious and decides he's going to keep Custer on the sidelines. Custer in fact tries to go to the White House to apologize to Grant and Grant refuses to see him.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Grant would respond by stripping Custer of command of the 7th Cavalry, saying that he could not go out in pursuit of Sitting Bull. For Custer this was the lowest of the low. I mean here he was, he was on the edge of what might have been his final campaign to win the glory that could give him all sorts of honors and this testimony had tripped him up and now he had none other than the president of the United States against him.

**Narrator:** Custer was reduced to pleading with Grant for his career. "I appeal to you as a soldier," he wrote to the President, "to spare me the humiliation of seeing my regiment march to meet the enemy and I not to share its dangers." Grant was unmoved, but Sheridan and Brigadier General Alfred Terry, both desperately wanted Custer in the field.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** In the end, it's General Terry who saves him. Terry is not an Indian fighter, he's been an administrator. And he's a good deal older than

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Custer. And he realizes that Custer is probably his best bet as far as leadership and accomplishing the objectives of his department. So he helps Custer draft a letter that pleads his case and gets Custer reinstated. But with a caveat that Terry will be leading the column.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Custer's like a kid who is always getting into trouble in school, but is so charming that his smile will get him through it. And so he's heading west again in '76, in search of redemption, as well as in search of glory.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer had incredible success at a very young age and the qualities that made him a success, his daring, his flamboyance, were qualities of youth. And I think throughout his entire life he worried that the clock was running out and that if he didn't achieve a kind of permanent glory before a certain point in his life he would never have the chance. He was somebody who was really preparing to kind of go for broke.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer's best friend in life was a Shakespearean actor named Lawrence Barrett. And in the winter of 1876 Barrett was in New York starring as Cassius in *Julius Caesar*. Custer loved the theater, he, as Libbie would say, he would watch a play like a child, weep when it was sad, laugh outrageously when it was happy, that kind of thing. And if you read *Julius Caesar*, the end of that play is quite interesting because there you have Cassius and his friend, Brutus, they have murdered Caesar for the good of Rome and now they're being attacked by Caesar loyalist, Marc Anthony. And they're in a battle, the battle for their lives. And the decision is made to fall on their swords and Brutus, with whom Custer must have identified, would say, 'I shall have glory by this losing day.' Custer would see his friend in *Julius Caesar* at least 40 times during that winter.

**Narrator:** On May 10th, 1876, as General Terry and a chastened Custer arrived in Bismarck to ready the 7th Cavalry to head west, President Grant presided over the opening of the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia. It was a grand affair, with over 200 buildings, featuring scores of exhibits, including a giant Corliss steam engine, a new

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condiment known as Heinz Ketchup, and Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. More than 186,000 people were in attendance.

**Phil Deloria, Historian:** The Philadelphia centennial celebration is this amazing kind of thing. Americans come from all over the place to, you know, to see this. And there's fantastic technology and everything looks like this brilliant bright kind of future and it's celebratory and, and the Civil War is over and the sense that Indians are going to pose any kind of threat, right, to this American future that's steam rolling forward. Nobody really believes that.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** Custer knows the exposition is on and if he can just get a victory during the exposition, what a great backdrop for him. And a huge amount of press coverage and public adulation will surely follow his inevitable victory over the Sioux and the Cheyenne.

**Narrator:** The 7th Cavalry departed from Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17th, and headed west. Grant's ultimatum had come and gone, and Sitting Bull and his band were still at large. Terry and Custer had been ordered to force them onto the reservation, or destroy them in the process. "Although we had seen the men start out on many long campaigns, in those seven years on the plains," Libbie recalled later, "we knew that this was different, and we all felt that it might have very serious results." Unable to stay behind, Libbie accompanied the regiment on its first day's march. Riding near the front with her husband, she looked back at the column and saw an astonishing sight.

**Actor, reading words of Libbie Custer:** As the sun broke through the mist a mirage appeared which took up about half of the line of cavalry, and thenceforth for a little distance it marched, equally plain to the sight on the earth and in the sky... It seemed a premonition in the supernatural translation as their forms were reflected from the opaque mist of the early dawn.

**Shirley Leckie, Historian:** She comforts herself with the idea that Custer's luck has always stood him in good stead. And he doesn't seem to be troubled. He hopes to be back in the

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summer and that they will have time together, he looks forward to being on the lecture circuit and making money. Finally, he leads his men off and he stood up in the stirrups, he turned around, he waved to her, and that was the last that she ever saw.

**Narrator:** The 7th Cavalry numbered 670 men, divided into 12 companies, each commanded by a captain, as well as a company of guides, interpreters and Indian scouts -- mostly Crow and Arikara who, as lifelong enemies of the Lakota, had allied themselves with the Americans. Custer's staff included his adjutant, Lieutenant William Cooke, his brother Tom, as aide-de-camp, his other brother Boston, as a guide, and his nephew Autie Reed, who came along as a civilian. Custer's brother-in-law, Lieutenant Calhoun, was one of the company commanders.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The younger officers were solidly behind Custer, even dressed like Custer in buckskin. And if not worshiped him, would follow him anywhere. But always there was Benteen and, and those few officers who, who did not see Custer as the God-given answer to all. And this would mean that there was always an edge to whatever happened in the 7th Cavalry.

**Narrator:** One man who was not welcomed into Custer's confidence was Major Reno. An officer with an undistinguished Civil War record, a brooding and dark countenance, and a weakness for whiskey, Reno harbored ambitions to lead the 7th Cavalry, but his chance at glory had never come.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The Arikara referred to him as the man with a dark face. And that really was him. He, there was a cloud over him and he always seemed like he, he needed to do something to right a wrong that had somehow been smoldering inside him pretty much all his life.

**Narrator:** General Terry's plan was for the army to put three columns into the field. He and Custer would lead 1,200 men from Fort Lincoln and head west, while 440 men under Colonel

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John Gibbon would march east from Montana and General George Crook would lead 1,100 men northwards from Wyoming. All three columns would converge on an area of the Upper Yellowstone, and its north-flowing tributaries, the Powder, Tongue, Rosebud and Bighorn rivers, where the Indians were supposed to be encamped. The steamboat *Far West* would meet the troops on the Yellowstone with supplies.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Terry's overall plan for the campaign called for three converging columns to move into Sitting Bull's country. The idea was never that the columns would converge and attack together but the hope would be that one column would drive the Indians into another column. Everyone was worried about the Indians escaping. The mania was how will we ever catch them. There's no worry about how many Indians there are. Nobody's worried about that.

**Narrator:** Out on the trail at last, Custer was in high spirits, and despite Terry's orders to remain with the group, he and his brothers repeatedly disappeared on impulsive hunting and exploring jaunts.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Almost as soon as the march starts, he's doing everything he can to stray from the column. He and his brothers are having a great time raising hell on the Plains. And, and Terry's getting increasingly frustrated until finally Terry chastises Custer and says, look, you got to stay with the column.

**Narrator:** By June 9th, the expedition had followed the Yellowstone to its confluence with the Powder River. Then, perhaps to punish Custer for his skylarking, Terry sent Major Reno and half the regiment south to scout the Powder River basin in search of Sitting Bull's band. The decision to put Reno in charge stunned the rest of the regiment. "It has been a subject of conversation among the officers why General Custer was not in command," one lieutenant confided to his journal, "but no solution yet has been arrived at."

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**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer is left to lead the rest of the regiment towards a rendezvous, but on the way they come across an abandoned Lakota winter camp where hundreds, perhaps thousands of Lakota had spent the winter. And there he finds evidence of a soldier who had apparently been beaten to death, tortured to death and his body eventually burned. And Custer sees the skull, looks down on it and is clearly moved in some way. And it's at that point that they camp right beside this Indian burial ground. And Custer seems to have been in the mood for revenge and he leads his brothers and some other officers in a systematic desecration of this burial ground. He and his brothers had a great old time. They would write letters about the great stuff that they had gotten. But for some of the other officers and soldiers, this was pretty horrifying stuff.

**Narrator:** Four days later Reno rejoined the regiment with exciting news. Contrary to his orders, and against everyone's expectations, he had crossed over to the Rosebud and found a large trail that could only have been made by Sitting Bull's village. Reno had followed the tracks for several miles, but with his provisions dwindling, he had eventually decided to turn around and rejoin the column.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer was outraged. He said, Reno if you see this village why didn't you pursue? He thought it was an expression of cowardice this was one of those things that military people did. If you knew you would get a great victory, even though it was contrary to orders, you did it. And Reno after thinking about it for a while decided not to pursue the Lakota. Custer couldn't understand this.

**Narrator:** That night, Custer was so insulted by Reno's caution, that he penned an anonymous letter to the New York *Herald*, impugning Reno's courage. "Faint heart never won fair lady," he wrote, "neither did it ever pursue and overtake an Indian village." On June 21st, at the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Rosebud, Terry gathered his officers in his cabin on the *Far West*, and unveiled his revised plan. Major Marcus Reno was not invited to the meeting. Terry ordered Custer to pick-up the Indian trail that Reno had found, but then,

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instead of following it, to loop south, until he and Gibbon could converge on the Indians from the north.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer was a known quantity. You knew what you had with him. And to expect him to delay for a day and a half while Terry and the rest of the column positioned themselves was an absurdity. What Terry was doing was making sure that if everything went well, he was in a good position because it was a great victory. If everything went poorly, he was covered, because Custer had to break orders to attack the Indians in the way that they all knew he would.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** Terry absolutely knew that if he let Custer loose, Custer was going to find the Indians and Custer was going to attack the Indians. Custer didn't slip the leash, the leash was released and he was, off he went. He's just like one of those wolf hounds that he loves so much. He's absolutely on the scent and he's going 90 miles an hour, nothing is going to stop him, everybody knew that, that's why he's there.

**Narrator:** As Gibbon's chief of scouts recorded in his diary, "if Custer is to arrive first he is at liberty to attack at once if he deems prudent... He will undoubtedly exert himself to the utmost to get there first and win all the laurels for himself and his regiment."

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** The assumption with fighting the Plains Indians was that they weren't very good at fighting. That is, they won't stand and fight. They'll snipe at you, they'll hold you off and then they'll scatter and run. Charging into the village from a number of different directions was army doctrine at the time. Since the Indians have no command system, they don't know which way to run to fight you. And therefore they'll become demoralized and they'll flee or surrender, so you should be able to defeat a much larger Indian force with a smaller force of cavalry.

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**Narrator:** On June 22nd, Custer and his regiment, along with a pack train of mules, carrying rations and ammunition, bade farewell to Terry and Gibbon. As they rode off, Gibbon called out, "Now Custer, don't be greedy, save some for us." "No," Custer replied, "I will not."

Five days before Custer set off, General George Crook and his Wyoming Column, were relaxing along the banks of the Rosebud. Suddenly, a large force of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors came pouring out of the mountains. Crook's men tried desperately to defend themselves as wave after wave of Indians attacked. Only the brave fighting of their Crow and Shoshone scouts prevented the Wyoming Column from being overrun. The next day a shaken Crook retreated south. Never before had Indians so boldly attacked *him*, in force, and kept up a battle all day long. He eventually sent a report back to General Sheridan in Chicago, but he made no effort to inform Terry of what had happened.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** A real sea change was occurring in terms of the population of the Lakota and Cheyenne, it was moving out in support of Sitting Bull who had put out the call, come on out, you know, this may be our last summer out here on the Plains. There's a lot of buffalo, look what they're doing with the Black Hills. Come on out.

**Phil Deloria, Historian:** People start coalescing around Sitting Bull. People start leaving reservations to gather up together, to provide one sort of massed group that are going to fight off this, you know, this incursion and this, and this direct threat.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** And so there was a desperation, there were people coming together, there were warriors coming together and joining forces. And so they started gathering and gathering.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** And soon the Little Bighorn valley is teeming with life. A vast pony herd numbering in the thousands. And not just hundreds of people, but in the great camp circles there are thousands upon thousands of people, perhaps the greatest gathering of native peoples on the Northern Plains in its history. For Sitting Bull's people, there's no place

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to run, there's no place to go. This is it. I mean this is the last great defense of the Lakota homeland.

**Narrator:** Custer's column found the trail of Sitting Bull's village on June 23rd, and began following it. "There's a lot of them," Custer said at one point to his orderly, John Burkman, "more than we figured." Burkman asked if there were too many. Custer smiled and replied, "What the 7th can't lick, the whole U.S. army couldn't lick." Worried that Sitting Bull's band would scatter, Custer pushed his column hard, marching through the night of June 24th, until his exhausted men collapsed on the eastern slope of a divide in the Wolf Mountains. On the other side, Custer hoped, would be Sitting Bull's village. If he and his men were still undetected, if the village could be surrounded, if they could turn their surprise into an advantage, Custer might at last have the victory he so desperately needed. Shortly after dawn on the 25th, Custer climbed to the top of the divide, to an overlook called The Crow's Nest.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** They cannot see the village directly because the terrain is very deceptive. But in the valley of the Little Bighorn, they can see arising a huge cloud of smoke.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** The Crow scouts were the first ones to recognize the fact that there was, they said, there was more Indians there than the military had bullets.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Custer is very skeptical that there even is a village you know, that his eyes are darned good and he can't see it. But eventually he becomes convinced that yes you cannot see it directly, but this is going to prove to be the day.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Soon after he hears a report that several Sioux have been discovered near the pack train that's following the cavalry. And Custer is immediately worried

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that they've been discovered. His troops are exhausted, they've been marching for several days and they're about to engage in a battle against odds that they never predicted.

**Narrator:** Just after noon on June 25th, Custer organized his regiment into battalions, keeping five companies, some 200 men, under his command, while Reno and Benteen led battalions of three companies each.

**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer has surrounded himself with his loyalists. So all of his inner circle is traveling with him. This means that the pivotal forces that are crucial to diverting the attention of the village and to helping him surround it are led by the two men with whom he has a kind of deep enmity, both Major Marcus Reno and Frederick Benteen.

**Narrator:** Custer pushed forward, following the trail towards the village that ran along a small stream known as Sundance Creek.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** His scouts give him reason to believe that the Indians down there in the village have begun to scatter. That his greatest fear is unfolding.

**Narrator:** Custer divided his forces, sending Benteen towards some hills on the left, hoping to prevent the Indians from escaping to the southwest. Seeing dust ahead, and fearing that the Indians were beginning to scatter, Custer ordered Reno to attack, promising to support him. Then, Custer veered right, toward a set of high bluffs hoping to encircle the village and attack from the North. He reached the top of the bluffs and finally saw the immense village lying before him, seemingly defenseless. Custer sent a note to Benteen -- "Benteen. Come on. Big village. Come quick. Bring packs. Bring packs." Then, waving his hat in his hand, he shouted, "Hurrah, boys, we've got them! We'll finish them up and then go home to our station."

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Reno is ordered to charge into the village. He crosses the Little Bighorn River and he sets out with a little over a hundred men, charging

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down the valley. As he gets closer he still cannot see the village, but there's evidence of Indians.

**Narrator:** Reno's battalion kept racing forward, until they rounded a bend in the creek, and Sitting Bull's tipis came into view. A scattering of warriors were riding out to meet them. Suddenly, Reno ordered his men to halt and dismount. They formed a firing line, and began shooting into the village.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** He became convinced that Custer had ordered him into what was basically an ambush. By throwing out this skirmish line he was putting brakes to it, literally. And unfortunately what happened is that all of the fear and panic that he had flowing into that village, began to flow the other way.

**Narrator:** Watching Reno's men pause, a mounted Sitting Bull sent his nephew and another warrior to see if the soldiers would negotiate, but they were fired upon and badly wounded. Then Sitting Bull's favorite horse was killed. "Now my best horse is shot." He cried. "It is like they have shot me; attack them." More and more warriors came pouring out of the village, and the outnumbered troopers began a panicked retreat to a stand of trees alongside the river.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** The soldiers were not prepared. They were tired, they ridden all night long, you're fighting these Indians and they got war paint on and they look mean, you're scared of them and you're not going to act like normal. They were absolutely scared of the tribes coming and of course the Indians took advantage of that.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** They could see warriors flitting around the woods. The sounds were incredible. The whistles, the screams, the firing of the guns. Particularly bad were the arrows that were coming down through the trees. It was terrifying.

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**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** It was over 90 degrees, it was hot, you had gunpowder in the air, you had people screaming, people crying, women on the battlefield, that were rattling their tongue. Singing songs; singing praise songs.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** And what would happen is that Bloody Knife who was Custer's favorite Arikara scout was on a horse beside Reno as they were pulling everybody together. And at one point as Reno was talking to him in sign language, shots went out and Bloody Knife was hit in the back of the head and his blood and brains burst onto Reno's face. This seemed to be the last straw.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** You can tell that he was confused because he told the troopers to mount up, then to dismount, then to mount up, then to dismount, and after that all hell broke loose.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** I think Reno's behavior had a lot to do with the fact that he had been drinking whiskey during the charge down the valley. That didn't help so Reno, you know his face covered with blood lifts up his pistol and cries out, anyone who wants to live, follow me. And off he goes. Reno heads out of the timber, riding hell-bent for the river. The Indians are forcing them across. And so even though the bank is almost 10 feet high, they jump over into the river, and find a cut in the bank on the other side that allows only one person through. And this becomes a terrible bottleneck.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** Some of the soldiers got so scared and mixed up they even threw down their weapons in trying to get out of there. They had ridden all day. Their horses are tired and the Indian ponies were fresh. The Indians said it was like a buffalo hunt.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Those that survived make their way up into the bluffs and clearly Reno and, and the survivors are completely shell-shocked by the time they make it out of the valley.

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**Narrator:** As he arrived at the top of the hill, Reno saw Captain Benteen approaching. "For God's sake, Benteen," he said, "halt your command and help me. I've lost half my men." Benteen paused and replied, "Where is Custer?"

Reno's men had seen Custer wave his hat up on the bluffs and then disappear from view. Despite the fact that Benteen had received Custer's orders to "come quick," he and Reno, simply sat and talked.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** They do nothing. There's firing occurring to the north on the other side of an intervening bluff. All the warriors have rushed in that direction.

Reno and Benteen spend more than an hour and a half basically doing nothing. They're talking about Custer. And Benteen brings up the ghost of Major Joel Elliott. He says, I know what Custer's doing; he's marched off once again, to leave us. And like Major Joel Elliott we are probably going to be the ones who end up getting wiped out. It's fascinating to see at this absolutely pivotal point the ghost of the Washita bubbles up and, and leaves Custer without any support from the other battalions. Finally one of his officers -- Captain Weir, who is a good friend of Custer's -- is so frustrated by the lack of action and the fact that they can hear the firing to the north, he decides to head out on his own. And this seems to have shamed Benteen into following up. And they make it to this prominent hill and they look to the north and in the distance they see clouds of smoke and dust. They see what look like Indians shooting down into the ground. And then they see this group of warriors coalescing into a virtual tidal wave as they come streaming in their direction and they realize they've got to retreat and find some ground for a final stand.

**Narrator:** For the next 36 hours, Reno, Benteen, and 400 soldiers and scouts would hold off more than 2,000 Lakota and Cheyenne warriors. Finally, at sunset on June 26th, the exhausted men watched as Sitting Bull's entire village of 8,000 Indians and 20,000 horses, began to move away to the south.

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**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** That evening when the decision was made by Sitting Bull for the Indians to leave had to be an amazing sight. There would have been dogs barking, there would have been war songs going on, there would've been people crying, because there were Indian losses there as well. The cavalry didn't have their heart or their spirit into their fight whereas Sitting Bull and the rest of those warriors did. It was their land; it was their last stand. They were fighting for something completely different to a certain extent. They were fighting for their survival. They were fighting for their way of life.

**Narrator:** The following day, General Terry and Colonel Gibbon at last arrived on the battlefield. A lieutenant reported finding 197 bodies lying in the hills.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Terry makes his way up to the hill and one of the first people to speak is Benteen. And Benteen you know, where's Custer? And Terry says, well we're not sure exactly, but over on the, on the other side of that ridge are a couple of hundred bodies and we think that's where Custer is. And Benteen says, no no, Custer's alive, he's, he's on the Bighorn River, watering his horses while we've been here in this great siege. So Terry puts Benteen in charge of the group that go out to check out the battlefield and Benteen does that and one of his privates is the first to find Custer. And Benteen gets off his horse, walks down, looks down and says, "My God, it's him."

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** And what you see in that moment is the vindictive dream that Benteen had held to throughout those two days that Custer was out there and by their survival, they were going to bring him down, was gone. That Custer had been the Major Joel Elliott. Custer had been the one who had been abandoned and it had been Benteen you could argue that had abandoned him.

**Narrator:** The exact details of Custer's death would never be known. Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses would claim that he died early in the battle, attempting to cross the Little Bighorn at a place called Medicine Tail Coulee. A member of Custer's battalion later claimed to have seen him riding alone along the river's edge. Others argued he was one of the last to fall,

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while making a desperate attempt to capture Lakota and Cheyenne non-combatants at the northern end of the village.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The great mystery will always hover over this battle because everyone under Custer's immediate command would be killed. There were plenty of Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses, but it was just a crazy battlefield, smoke, dust, arrows everywhere, horses panicking, a wave of warriors, troopers basically naked in the middle of a battlefield; only about a hundred of them were alive. And then it was the unfolding of what has become known as the 'Last Stand' where you have you know just a basically a handful of people surrounded by this huge force.

**Narrator:** Custer's body was found at the crest of a flat-topped hill, with a bullet wound in his chest, and another through the left temple. His brother Tom lay beside him. Boston Custer, Autie Reed and William Cooke's bodies were all nearby.

**Narrator:** In the early morning hours of July 6th, 1876, the *Far West* completed its more than 700 mile journey and arrived at Fort Lincoln with the news of the disaster.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** The fort is asleep, but really no one is asleep because they've heard the whistle from the steamboat as it came into Bismarck a couple hours earlier. And so they go to the Custer's quarters and tap on the door. And Libbie is, comes downstairs with her sister-in-law, Custer's sister. And they get the news.

**Narrator:** Libbie Custer and 26 other women at the Fort were now widows. "Imagine the grief of these stricken women," one observer noted, "their sobs, their flood of tears, the grief that knew no consolation."

**Shirley Leckie, Historian:** Libbie has to be the commanding officer's wife, she has to be of comfort to the other women, and she keeps that in mind at the same time she's shivering even though it's very hot. Once she has performed that duty, she goes into a very deep depression.

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**Paul Hutton, Historian:** No one could believe it that Custer, and all of his companies of the 7th, had been wiped out. Custer the boy general, Custer the hero of the plains, and the 7th Cavalry, wiped out. How could that possibly be true? No one could believe it.

**Gerard Baker, National Park Service:** They couldn't accept the fact that Custer was beaten by American Indians. And some of the press even went so far as to say that Sitting Bull really wasn't Indian. They didn't want to accept the fact that an Indian or Indians outsmarted them.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** They say that Sitting Bull must have studied Napoleon to defeat Custer. That he was a spy who graduated from West Point and then had gone back to the Sioux and had become you know this genius, a military genius for the Sioux.

**Narrator:** There were immediate calls for revenge, and the Army of the West dispatched new columns of troops to track down the Indians. By the fall of that year, virtually all of the Lakota and Cheyenne would be forced back onto the reservations. Only Sitting Bull remained unyielding, living with his band of 5,000 Lakota in Canada. Meanwhile, Americans argued over who was responsible for the debacle at the Little Bighorn. "I regard Custer's Massacre as a sacrifice of troops that was wholly unnecessary," President Grant declared. In his report, General Terry blamed the catastrophe squarely on the 7th's commander. Even Custer's allies, Sherman and Sheridan, admitted that he had been "rashly imprudent to attack such a large number of Indians." One voice, however, refused to allow General Custer to take the blame.

**Shirley Leckie, Historian:** Libbie Custer has to decide what she's going to do with her life, and her cousin tells her wouldn't you rather be the widow of such a man than the wife of many another. And that's the basic decision that Libby makes, that she will find ways of maintaining his reputation as a hero.

**Narrator:** Libbie's ally in her campaign to sanctify her husband's memory came in the guise of a dime novelist named Frederick Whittaker. She granted him access to some of George's

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personal letters, and he quickly fashioned a fawning biography of Custer that extolled his heroic virtues and dauntless courage.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** What the Whittaker biography does is it takes a scattered bunch of stories that exist in this newspaper and that magazine and it composes a master story. Now you've got the authoritative source for the Custer legend.

**Narrator:** Painted as the villain in Whittaker's book, Marcus Reno spent the rest of his life fighting to clear his name. Consumed by alcohol and dismissed from the service, he died of complications from throat cancer in 1889. Frederick Benteen continued his career, until he criticized one commander too many, and was forced out of the army. He would keep writing diatribes about Custer for years, unable to escape his nemesis. While many of the participants in the Battle of the Little Bighorn seemed tormented by the experience, one Westerner managed to turn a profit on it. Only weeks after the news of the massacre, the western scout and promoter, William F. Cody, could be seen on a New York stage in a melodrama entitled *Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** Right away Custer becomes a kind of martyr to the cause of American progress, and this allows the cause to be more acceptable than ever, because it isn't as if Americans have not sacrificed anything now. Right, it's not as if they haven't given something up. They gave up Custer. The more glorious they can paint Custer in the aftermath of his death the more they seem to have sacrificed as they take away all the Indians' land.

**Narrator:** In the end, it was Libbie who did the most to burnish the Custer legend.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** Libbie becomes a grieving widow, not a role she would have chosen, but it's one she takes on for the rest of her life. And the widow is a very powerful figure in American culture. It's impossible to criticize her husband while she's alive. She writes three memoirs and in these books she presents life with George Custer as charming and glorious and honorable.

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**Narrator:** Her books became best-sellers, and shaped the image of Custer for more than half a century, until Libbie died in 1933, just four days shy of her 91st birthday.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** Libbie fashioned one version of the Custer we know, but there were many more to come. Custer, you know, is a lightning rod. He is an icon. He's wired for immortality in a way in that as the times change, he's there to channel those changes. And so with each age, he's re-invented.

**Louis Warren, Historian:** In 1941 comes Errol Flynn's role as Custer in *They Died With Their Boots On*. And this movie at that moment, the Last Stand scene is very useful for Americans who are conceiving of combat in these terms. The civilization that must triumph with the men who will not surrender, through the men who will not surrender, even when they are faced by overwhelming odds. After the Second World War, and especially by the time of the Vietnam War, the Last Stand myth gets put to different purposes, most famously in *Little Big Man*. It becomes useful for critics, who present Custer as crazy, an absolute maniac, a megalomaniac. And the Last Stand becomes the final proof of his insanity and of the insanity of the whole expansionist, imperialist mission.

**Richard Slotkin, Historian:** A hero, a myth is a symbol to think with. And as we change our attitudes about race, as we change our attitudes about Native Americans, as we reread American history as our present changes, looking backwards, we reinterpret the image of Custer.

**Paul Hutton, Historian:** He's gone from hero to villain, from brilliant commander to fool. He is deeply flawed. But the ambition, the ruthlessness is why we remember him.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Author, *The Last Stand*:** I think this is ultimately kind of passion play, where human personality is laid out there in the most extraordinary, terrifying circumstances. And it's not pretty. It never is pretty.

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**Michael Elliott, Cultural Historian:** Custer is controversial for the same reasons he was so successful in his own time. He was an outsized personality who used the tools around him to shape himself into a public figure that embodies many of the things that make us uncomfortable about American history. The way that Americans sometimes rush into a military action, the way that America has treated American Indians and other peoples now around the world. These are questions that are really raw and nagging and we, we haven't resolved them. And until we do we're going to keep returning to Custer and the controversies that surround him.

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