

**Nathaniel Philbrick**

# THE LAST STAND

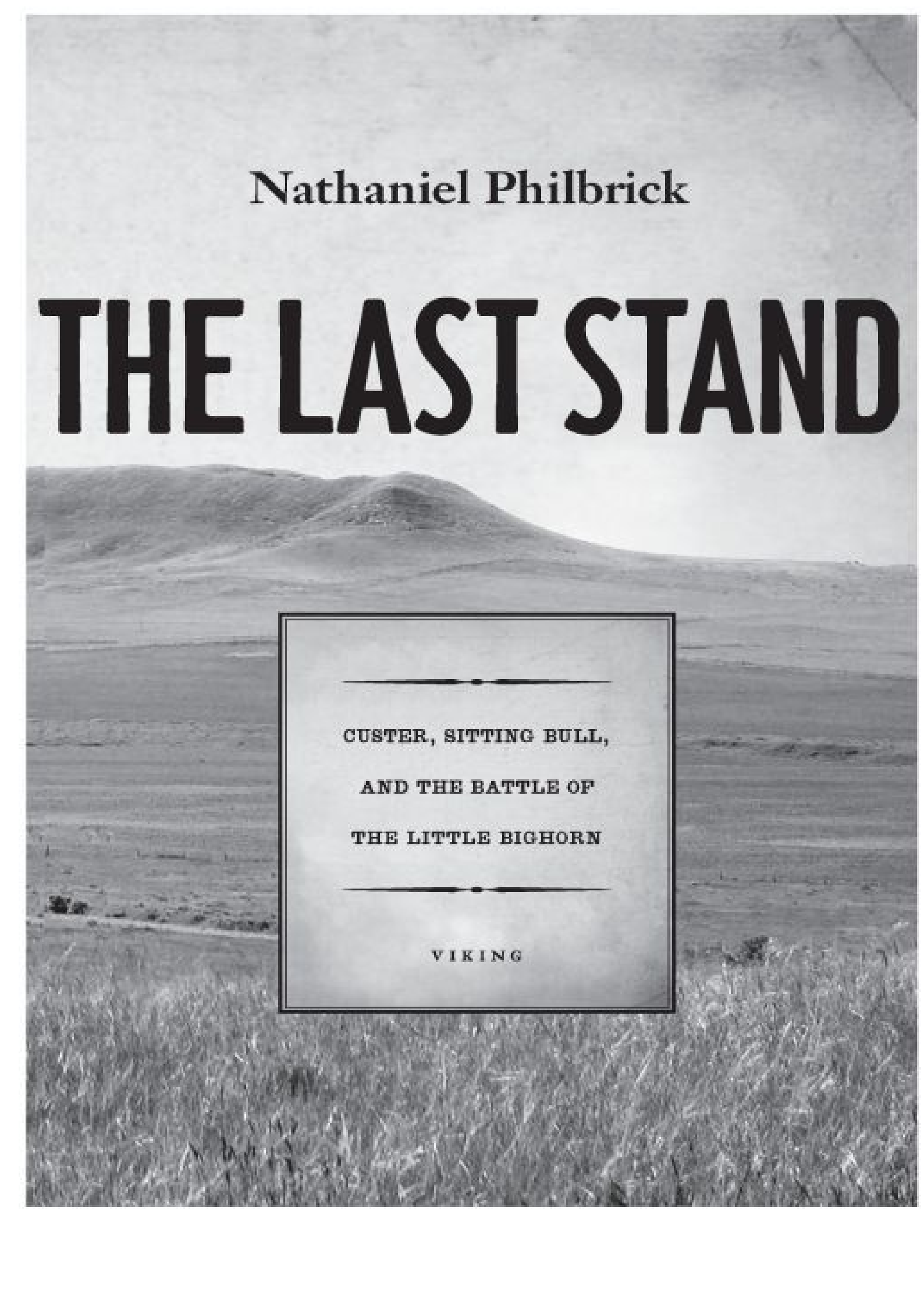
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**CUSTER, SITTING BULL,  
AND THE BATTLE OF  
THE LITTLE BIGHORN**

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**VIKING**





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Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord, to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Absalom, Absalom!*

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# PREFACE

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## Custer's Smile

It was, he later admitted, a “rashly imprudent” act. He and his regiment were pursuing hostile Indians across the plains of Kansas, a portion of the country about which he knew almost nothing. And yet when his pack of English greyhounds began to chase some antelope over a distant hill, he could not resist the temptation to follow. It wasn't long before he and his big, powerful horse and his dogs had left the regiment far behind.

Only gradually did he realize that these rolling green hills possessed a secret. It seemed as if the peak up ahead was high enough for him to catch a glimpse of the regiment somewhere back there in the distance. But each time he and his horse reached the top of a rise, he discovered that his view of the horizon was blocked by the surrounding hills. Like a shipwrecked sailor bobbing in the giant swells left by a recent storm, he was enveloped by wind-rippled crests and troughs of grass and was soon completely lost.

In less than a decade this same trick of western topography would lure him to his death on a flat-topped hill beside a river called the Little Bighorn. On that day in Kansas, however, George Armstrong Custer quickly forgot about his regiment and the Indians they were supposedly pursuing when he saw his first buffalo: an enormous, shaggy bull. In the years to come he would see hundreds of thousands of these creatures, but none, he later claimed, as large as this one. He put his spurs to his horse's sides and began the chase.

Both Custer and his horse were veterans of the recent war. Indeed, Custer had gained a reputation as one of the Union's greatest cavalry officers. Wearing a sombrero-like hat, with long blond ringlets flowing down to his shoulders, he proved to be a true prodigy of war—charismatic, quirky, and fearless—and by the age of twenty-three, just two years after finishing last in his class at West Point, he had been named a brigadier general.

In the two years since Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Custer had come to long for the battlefield. Only amid the smoke, blood, and confusion of war had his fidgety and ambitious mind found peace. But now, in the spring of 1867, as his trusted horse galloped to within shooting range of the buffalo, he began to feel some of the old wild joy. Amid the beat of hooves and the bellowslike suck and blast of air through his horse's nostrils emerged the transcendent presence of the buffalo: ancient, vast, and impossibly strong in its thundering charge across the infinite plains. He couldn't help but shout with excitement. As he drew close, he held out his pearl-handled pistol and started to plunge the barrel into the dusty funk of the buffalo's fur, only to withdraw the weapon so as to, in his own words, “prolong the enjoyment of the race.”

After several more minutes of pursuit, he decided it was finally time for the kill. Once again he pushed the gun into the creature's pelt. As if sensing Custer's intentions, the buffalo abruptly turned

toward the horse.

It all happened in an instant: ~~The horse veered away from the buffalo's horns, and when Custer tried~~ to grab the reins with both hands, his finger accidentally pulled the trigger and fired a bullet into the horse's head, killing him instantly. Custer had just enough time to disengage his feet from the stirrups before he was catapulted over the neck of the collapsing animal. He tumbled onto the ground, struggled to his feet, and faced his erstwhile prey. Instead of charging, the buffalo simply stared at the strange, outlandish creature and stalked off.

Horseless and alone in Indian country—except for his panting dogs—George Custer began the long and uncertain walk back to his regiment.

. . .

Like many Americans, I first learned about George Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn not in school but at the movies. For me, a child of the Vietnam War era, Custer was the deranged maniac of *Little Big Man*. For those of my parents' generation, who grew up during World War II, Custer was the noble hero played by Errol Flynn in *They Died with Their Boots On*. In both instances, Custer was more of a cultural lightning rod than a historical figure, an icon instead of a man.

Custer's transformation into an American myth had much to do with the timing of the disaster. When word of his defeat first reached the American public on July 7, 1876, the nation was in the midst of celebrating the centennial of its glorious birth. For a nation drunk on its own potency and power, the news came as a frightening shock. Much like the sinking of the unsinkable *Titanic* thirty-six years later, the devastating defeat of America's most famous Indian fighter just when the West seemed finally won caused an entire nation to wonder how this could have happened. We have been trying to figure it out ever since.

Long before Custer died at the Little Bighorn, the myth of the Last Stand already had a strong pull on human emotions, and on the way we like to remember history. The variations are endless—from the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae to Davy Crockett at the Alamo—but they all tell the story of a brave and intractable hero leading his tiny band against a numberless foe. Even though the odds are overwhelming, the hero and his followers fight on nobly to the end and are slaughtered to a man. In defeat the hero of the Last Stand achieves the greatest of victories, since he will be remembered for all time.

When it comes to the Little Bighorn, most Americans think of the Last Stand as belonging solely to George Armstrong Custer. But the myth applies equally to his legendary opponent Sitting Bull. For while the Sioux and Cheyenne were the victors that day, the battle marked the beginning of their own Last Stand. The shock and outrage surrounding Custer's stunning defeat allowed the Grant administration to push through measures that the U.S. Congress would not have funded just a few weeks before. The army redoubled its efforts against the Indians and built several forts on what had previously been considered Native land. Within a few years of the Little Bighorn, all the major tribal leaders had taken up residence on Indian reservations, with one exception. Not until the summer of 1881 did Sitting Bull submit to U.S. authorities, but only after first handing his rifle to his son Crowfoot, who then gave the weapon to an army officer. "I wish it to be remembered that I was the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle," Sitting Bull said. "This boy has given it to you, and I now wants to know how he is going to make a living."

Sitting Bull did not go quietly into the dark night of reservation life at the Standing Rock Agency what would become North and South Dakota. Even as the number of his supporters dwindled, he did his best to frustrate the attempts of the reservation's agent, Major James McLaughlin, to reduce his influence within the tribe. Tensions between the two men inevitably mounted, and when a new Native religious movement called the Ghost Dance caused authorities to fear a possible insurrection, McLaughlin ordered Sitting Bull's arrest. A group of Native police were sent to his cabin on the Grand River, and at dawn on December 15, 1890, Sitting Bull, along with Crowfoot and Sitting Bull's adopted brother Jumping Bull, was shot to death. A handful of Sitting Bull's supporters fled to the Pine Ridge Agency to the south, where Custer's old regiment, the Seventh Cavalry, had been called to put a stop to the Ghost Dance craze. The massacre that unfolded on December 29 at a creek called Wounded Knee was seen by at least some of the officers of the Seventh Cavalry as overdue revenge for their defeat at the Little Bighorn.

This is the story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but it is also the story of two Last Stands, for it is impossible to understand the one without the other.

By refusing to back down in the face of impossible odds, the heroes of the Last Stand project an aura of righteous and charismatic determination. But when does resistance to the inevitable simply become an expression of personal ego or, even worse, of narrow-minded nostalgia for a vanished past?

Custer embraced the notion of the warrior as a seventeenth-century cavalier: the long-haired romantic with his dogs and his flamboyant clothes cheerfully leading his men into the maw of death. Even when presented with the devastating specter of total war at Gettysburg and Antietam, and later with the sordid, hardly heroic reality of the Indian wars of the West, where torching a village of noncombatants was considered a great victory, Custer managed to see himself as the dashing, even gallant dragoon.

For his part, Sitting Bull clung defiantly to traditional Lakota ways even though by the summer of 1877 most other Native leaders had come to realize that, like it or not, some kind of compromise was unavoidable. Instead of negotiating with the U.S. government, Sitting Bull turned his back and walked away. Like Custer galloping into a hostile village of unknown size, Sitting Bull had no interest in visiting Washington, D.C., prior to his surrender and seeing for himself the true scope of what threatened his people from the east.

And yet, both Custer and Sitting Bull were more than the cardboard cutouts they have since become. Instead of stubborn anachronisms, they were cagey manipulators of the media of their day. Custer's published accounts of his exploits gave him a public reputation out of all proportion to his actual accomplishments—at least that's what more than a few fellow army officers claimed. Sitting Bull gave a series of newspaper interviews in the aftermath of the Little Bighorn that helped make him one of the most sought-after celebrities in America. A tour with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show only heightened his visibility and also helped to engender the jealousy and resentment that ultimately contributed to his death once he returned to the reservation.

Both Custer and Sitting Bull are often portrayed as grimly resolute in their determination to fight. But even as the first bullets were being fired upon his people, Sitting Bull held out hope that peace, not war, might be the ultimate result of the army's appearance at the Little Bighorn. Custer had demonstrated a remarkable talent for negotiation and diplomacy prior to his last battle. The tragedy of both their lives is that they were not given the opportunity to explore those alternatives. Instead, they died alongside their families (a son and a brother were killed with Sitting Bull; two brothers,

brother-in-law, and a nephew fell with Custer) and gained undying fame.

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Americans have lived with the familiar images of the “Old West” for more than two centuries. But for those who actually participated in the events of that past, the West was dynamic, unpredictable, and startlingly new. Native horse culture was only a few generations old by the time Lewis and Clark ventured west in 1804, and ever-building pressure from the East meant that the tribes’ territories and alliances remained in near-constant flux throughout the nineteenth century.

The legends notwithstanding, Custer’s regiment in 1876 was anything but an assemblage of craggy-faced Marlboro men. Forty percent of the soldiers in Custer’s Seventh Cavalry had been born outside the United States in countries like Ireland, England, Germany, and Italy; of the Americans, almost all of them had grown up east of the Mississippi River. For this decidedly international collection of soldiers, the Plains were as strange and unworldly as the surface of the moon.

Most of us were taught that the American frontier crept west like an inevitable tide. Instead of a line, the frontier was an ever-constricting zone: a region of convulsive, often unpredictable change across which the American people, aided and abetted by the military, lurched and leapt into new and potentially profitable lands.

In 1876, there were no farms, ranches, towns, or even military bases in central and eastern Montana. For all practical and legal purposes, this was Indian territory. Just two years before, however, gold had been discovered in the nearby Black Hills by an expedition led by none other than George Custer. As prospectors flooded into the region, the U.S. government decided that it had no choice but to acquire the hills—by force if necessary—from the Indians. Instead of an effort to defend innocent American pioneers from Indian attack, the campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne in the spring of 1876 was an unprovoked military invasion of an independent nation that already happened to exist within what came to be declared the United States.

America was not the only place in the world where Western and indigenous peoples were coming into conflict in the late nineteenth century. Little Bighorn–like battles had been or were about to be fought in India, the Middle East, and Africa—most spectacularly, perhaps, at Isandlwana in 1879 when twenty-four thousand Zulus annihilated a British force of more than thirteen hundred men. And yet, there *is* something different about the American version of colonialism. Since the battles were not fought on a distant and colonized continent but within our own interior, we are living with the consequences every day. After four years of research and several trips to the battlefield, along with a memorable visit to the site of Sitting Bull’s cabin, I now know that nothing ended at the Little Bighorn.

As a writer and a sailor, I have long been interested in what occurs within the behavioral laboratory of a ship at sea. The isolation, unpredictability, and inherent danger of life aboard a sailing vessel have a tendency to heighten the intensity of social interaction, particularly when it comes to the issue of leadership. So it was, I have since discovered, with both a regiment of cavalry and a nomadic Indian village on the northern plains in 1876—two self-contained and highly structured communities under enormous stress.

Sitting Bull had never seen the ocean, but as tensions mounted during the spring of 1876, he described his people in terms to which any mariner could relate. “We are,” he said, “an island of Indians in a lake of whites.” Late in life, one of George Custer’s officers, Frederick Benteen, also looked to the water when considering his often contentious relationship with his former commander.



“There are many excellent ways of finding out the disposition and nature of a man,” Benteen wrote. ~~know of no better way than having to live on shipboard with one for a series of years. . . . Next, default of salt-water facilities . . . , campaign with a man in the cavalry, for say 10 or 20 years. . . .~~ Thus I became acquainted with General Custer.”

The fluidity of the sea, not the rigidity of irresistible law, characterizes human conduct, especially in the midst of a calamity. Even when people are bound by strict codes of behavior, their distinctive personalities have a way of asserting themselves. Instead of a faceless “clash of cultures,” the Battle of the Little Bighorn was fought by individual soldiers and warriors, each with his own story to tell. In the pages that follow I have attempted to do justice to those stories even as I tell the larger, ultimate tragic story of how two leaders and their followers embarked on two converging voyages across the river-ribbed interior of North America.

The collision that occurred on June 25, 1876, resulted in three different battles with Sitting Bull at the village of Sioux and Cheyenne: one fought by Custer; another fought by his second-in-command, Major Marcus Reno; and yet another fought, for all intents and purposes, by Captain Frederick Benteen. Reno, Benteen, and a significant portion of their commands survived. Custer and every one of his officers and men were killed.

Even before the battles were over, Reno and Benteen had begun to calculate how to put their actions in the best possible light. Perhaps not surprisingly, a subsequent court of inquiry only compounded the prevarications. Problems of evidence also plagued Native accounts. In the years after the battle, warriors were concerned that they might suffer some form of retribution if they didn’t tell their whiling inquisitors what they wanted to hear. Then there were the problems associated with the interpreter, many of whom had their own agendas.

At times during my research, it seemed as if I had entered a hall of mirrors. Everywhere I turned there was yet another, fatally distorted account of the battle. Like Custer struggling to find a peak from which he could finally see around him, I searched desperately for a way to rise above the confusing welter of conflicting points of view and identify what really happened.

During my third visit to the battlefield, in the summer of 2009, as I followed a winding, steep-sided ravine toward the Little Bighorn, I realized my mistake. It was not a question of rising above the evidence; it was a question of burrowing into the mystery.

Custer and his men were last seen by their comrades galloping across a ridge before they disappeared into the seductive green hills. Not until two days later did the surviving members of the regiment find them: more than two hundred dead bodies, many of them hacked to pieces and bristling with arrows putrefying in the summer sun. Amid this “scene of sickening, ghastly horror,” they found Custer lying faceup across two of his men with, Private Thomas Coleman wrote, “a smile on his face.” Custer’s smile is the ultimate mystery of this story, the story of how America, the land of liberty and justice for all, became in its centennial year the nation of the Last Stand.

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# CHAPTER 1

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## At the Flood

High up in his floating tower, Captain Grant Marsh guided the riverboat *Far West* toward Fort Lincoln, the home of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the U.S. Army's Seventh Cavalry. This was Marsh's first trip up the Missouri since the ice and snow had closed the river the previous fall, and like any good pilot he was carefully studying how the waterway had changed.

Every year, the Missouri—at almost three thousand miles the longest river in the United States—reinvented itself. Swollen by spring rain and snowmelt, the Missouri wriggled and squirmed like an overloaded fire hose, blasting away tons of bottomland and, with it, grove after grove of cottonwood trees. By May, the river was studded with partially sunken cottonwoods, their sodden root-balls planted firmly in the mud, their water-laved trunks angled downriver like spears.

Nothing could punch a hole in the bottom of a wooden steamboat like the submerged tip of a cottonwood tree. Whereas the average life span of a seagoing vessel was twenty years, a Missouri riverboat was lucky to last five.

Rivers were the arteries, veins, and capillaries of the northern plains, the lifelines upon which all living things depended. Rivers determined the annual migration route of the buffalo herds, and it was the buffalo that governed the seasonal movements of the Indians. For the U.S. military, rivers were the point of entry into some of the country's most inaccessible areas. In May of 1876, before railroads extended across Montana, rivers provided Custer's Seventh Cavalry with provisions and equipment via Grant Marsh and the *Far West*.

The boiling, tree-laden rivers of spring were full of hazards, but the most difficult challenge negotiating the Missouri came in the summer and fall, when the water level dropped. A maddening network of sandbars emerged from the shallows, transforming the river into a series of slack-water lakes. If a boat was to make its way past these naturally occurring dams of silt and mud, it must not only possess minimal draft but also be able to *crawl* across the river bottom. By the late 1860s, what came to be known as the Missouri riverboat had been perfected: an amphibious watercraft that ran with the Bowie knife, barbed wire, and the Colt revolver as one of the quintessential innovations of the American West.

Grant Marsh's *Far West* was fairly typical. Built in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by an owner who believed that names with seven letters were lucky, she was 190 feet long with three decks, a cupola-like pilothouse, and two towering smokestacks. Unloaded, the *Far West* drew only twenty inches; when carrying two hundred tons of freight, she sank down just ten additional inches for a total draft of two and a half feet. She was also extremely powerful. Sheltered between her first and second decks were three boilers, which consumed as many as thirty cords of wood a day, along with two engines linked to a single, thirty-foot-wide stern wheel. When driven against a stiff current, every inch of the

*Far West* trembled and shook as the percussive exhaust of the high-pressure engines boomed like cannon fire and the smokestacks, known as “iron chimneys,” poured out twin trails of soot and ash.

It was the tangle of ropes and wooden poles on the bow that truly distinguished the Missouri riverboat from her less adaptable counterparts on the Mississippi. When the *Far West* grounded on the bar, two spars the size of telegraph poles were swung out ahead of the bow and driven down into the mud. Block-and-tackle systems attached to the tops of the spars were then led to a pair of steam-powered capstans. As the capstans winched the bow into the air on the crutchlike spars, the steering wheel drove the boat up and over the bar. Instead of a watercraft, a Missouri riverboat looked so much like a giant, smoke-belching insect as it lurched over the mud on two spindly legs that this technique of going where no riverboat had ever gone before became known as “grasshoppering.” It might take hours, sometimes days, to make it over a particularly nasty stretch of river bottom, but grasshoppering meant that a riverboat was now something more than a means of transportation. It was an invasive species of empire.

In the beginning, furs lured the boats up the Missouri; by the 1860s, it was gold that drew them so far north and west as Fort Benton, twenty-three hundred miles above the mouth of the Missouri and almost in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. In 1866, Grant Marsh, soon to become known as “the king of the pilots,” left Fort Benton with \$1.25 million worth of gold, said to be the most valuable cargo ever sent down the Missouri.

By that spring day in 1876, Marsh was no longer shipping gold out of the mountains of the West, but he was still working at the precious metal’s behest. Two years before, George Custer had led an expedition into the fabled Black Hills, an oval-shaped territory about the size of Connecticut in the southwest corner of modern South Dakota. Part Garden of Eden, part El Dorado, the Black Hills were a verdant and mountainous land of streams and lakes contained within a forbidding four-thousand-foot-high ridge of ancient rock covered in ponderosa pine. When seen from a distance, these steep, tree-shaded battlements appeared as dark as night, hence the hills’ name. Mysterious and remote (they were separated from the nearest American settlement by a hundred miles of desolate badlands), the Black Hills were sacred to the Sioux and—until Custer’s expedition—almost unknown to the white world, save for rumors of gold.

In 1873, a financial panic gripped the country. With the national debt over \$2 billion, the Grant administration was in desperate need of a way to replenish a cash-starved economy. And as had been proven in California back in 1849 and more recently in the Rockies, there was no quicker way to invigorate the country’s financial system than to discover gold. Despite the fact that it required them to trespass on what was legally Sioux land, General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, which extended all the way west to the Rockies, ordered Custer and the Seventh Cavalry to escort an exploring expedition from Fort Lincoln, just down the Missouri River from Bismarck, in modern North Dakota, to the Black Hills.

The supposed aim of the Black Hills Expedition of 1874 was to find a suitable site for a fort. However, the makeup of the column suggested that another, far more exciting goal was being considered. Included in Custer’s thousand-man expedition were President Grant’s eldest son, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Dent Grant; three newspaper reporters; a photographer; and two experienced gold miners.

Much to Custer’s surprise, the Indians proved few and far between once the regiment entered the Black Hills. On August 2, after several delightful weeks among the flower-laden mountains and valleys, the expedition discovered gold “right from the grass roots.” Over the next hundred years, more gold would be extracted from a single mine in the Black Hills (an estimated \$1 billion) than

from any other mine in the continental United States.

In the beginning, the government made only nominal efforts to prevent miners from intruding on the Black Hills. But by the summer of 1875 there were so many U.S. citizens in the region that the Grant administration decided it must purchase the hills from the Sioux. When the Sioux refused to sell, the administration felt it had no choice but to instigate a war. Once again, George Custer was called upon to lend his air of gallantry and panache to the dirty work of American imperialism.

The Sioux were told that they must report to a reservation by the end of January 1876 or be considered at war with the United States. When Sitting Bull and his people did not respond to the summons, it then became the army's responsibility to bring in the "hostiles," as the Indians who refused to submit to government demands were called in official correspondence. What was to have been a winter campaign sputtered and died in March without much result. General Sheridan then made preparations for a three-pronged spring campaign. The plan was for Custer's Seventh Cavalry to march west from Fort Lincoln in the Dakota Territory as troops led by Colonel John Gibbon marched east from Fort Ellis in the Montana Territory and troops under General George Crook marched north from Fort Fetterman in the Wyoming Territory. Each of these converging groups of soldiers was referred to as a column—as in Custer's Dakota Column—and with luck at least one of the columns would find the Indians.

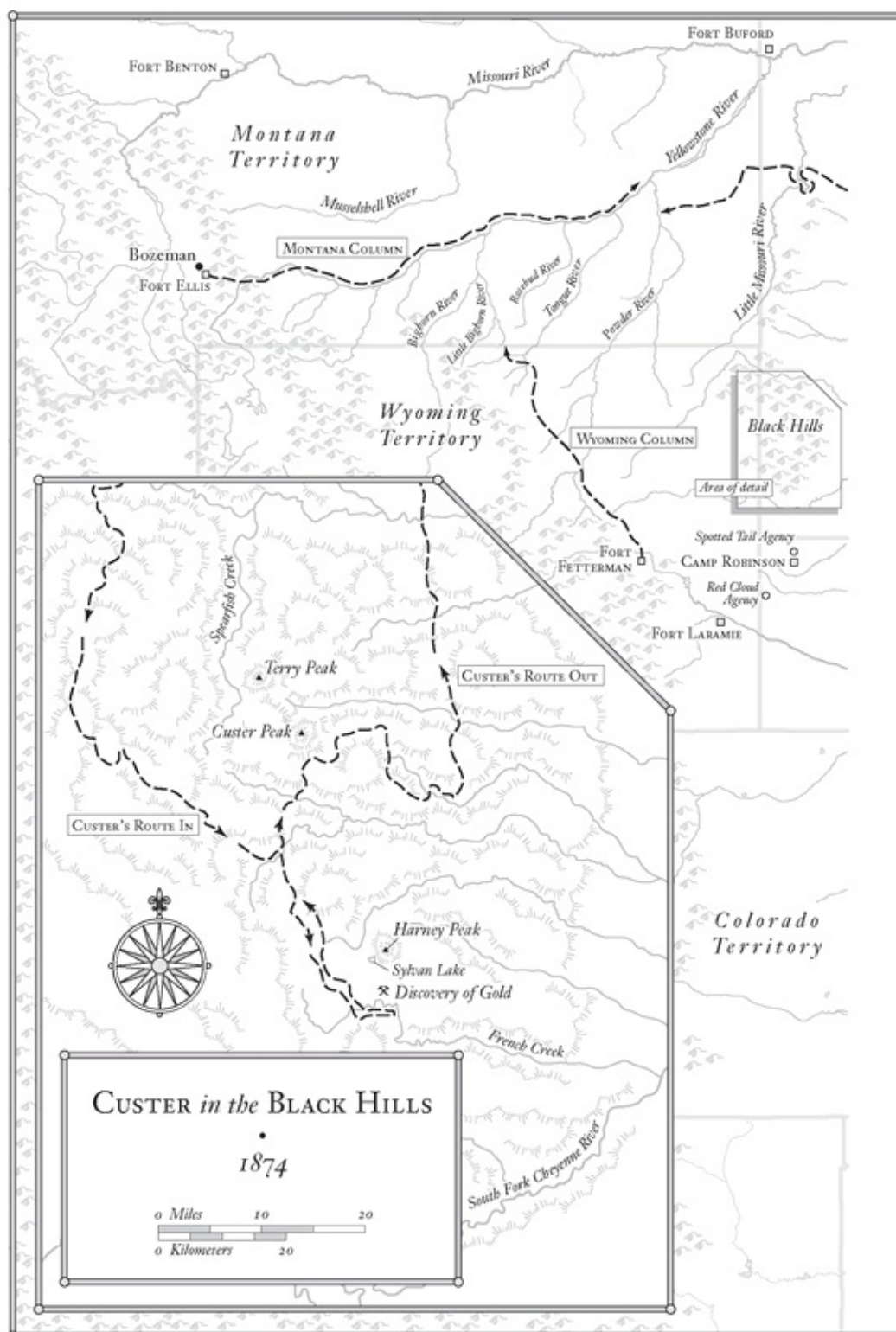
But as Custer prepared to lead his regiment against the Sioux in the spring of 1876, he was suddenly ordered to Washington, D.C. A Democrat-controlled congressional committee wanted him to testify about corruption within the War Department of Grant's Republican administration. Even though he had a campaign to prepare for, Custer decided he had best head east.

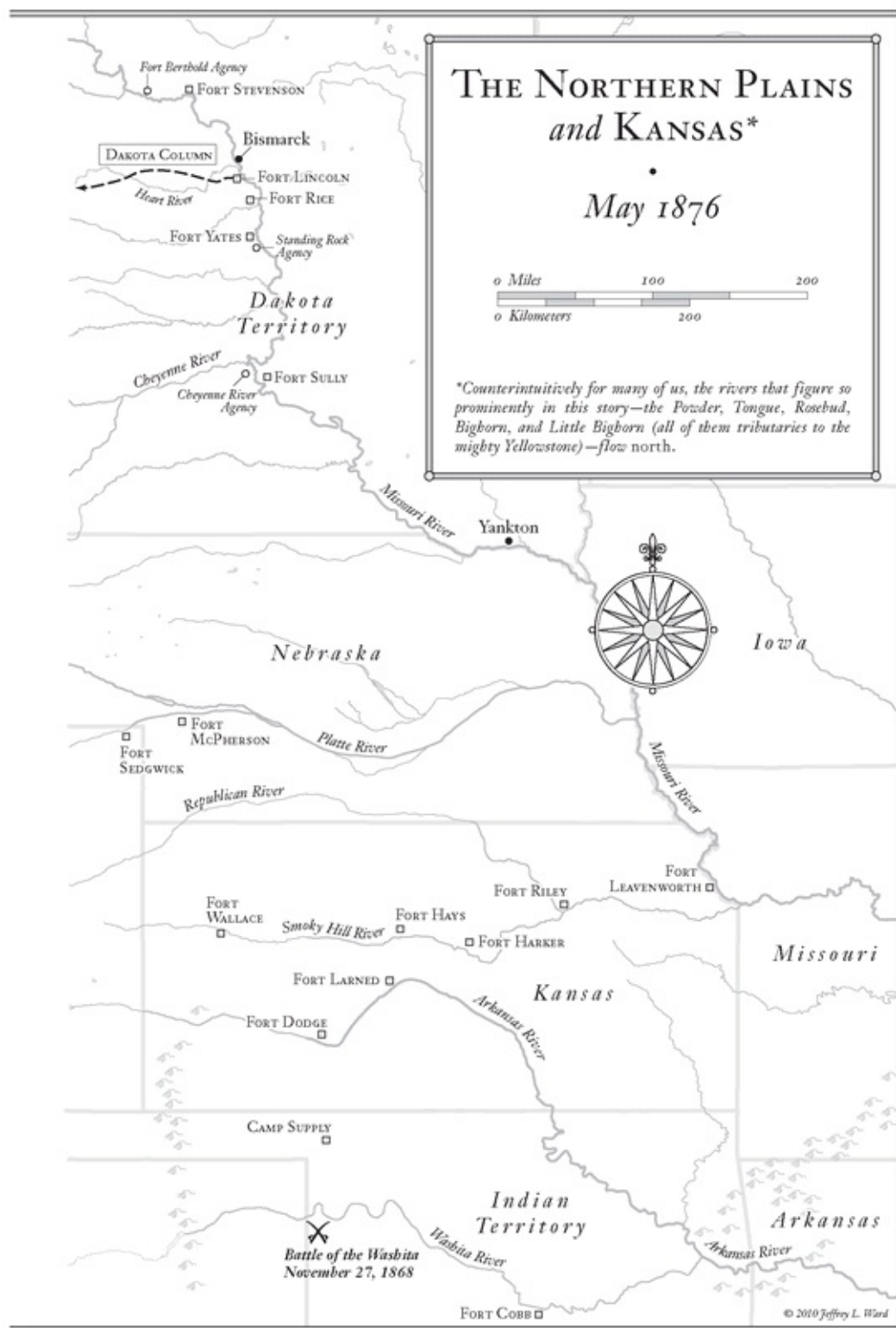
As it turned out, most of his testimony was based on hearsay and speculation. This did not prevent him from eagerly implicating Grant's secretary of war, William Belknap, who had already resigned to escape impeachment, and President Grant's brother Orville. The president was outraged, and despite the impending campaign, he blocked Custer's return to his regiment. Grant finally relented, but not without insisting that Custer's superior, Brigadier General Alfred Terry, stationed at department headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota, be named leader of the campaign to capture Sitting Bull, and in early May the two officers boarded the train for Bismarck.

As Grant Marsh steamed up the Missouri toward Fort Lincoln, he wasn't particularly concerned about whether Custer or Terry was leading the regiment. No matter who was in charge, Marsh and his riverboat were still being paid \$360 a day to provide the Seventh Cavalry with forage and ammunition and whatever transportation assistance they might require. But for George Custer, who considered the regiment *his*, the presence of General Terry made all the difference in the world.

On May 10, 1876, as Terry and Custer traveled together by train from St. Paul to Bismarck, President Ulysses S. Grant opened the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Like just about everything else associated with the final year of Grant's two-term administration, the ceremony did not go well.

There were more than 186,000 people at the exhibition that day. The fairgrounds, surrounded by three miles of fence, contained two hundred buildings, including the two largest structures in the world: the twenty-one-acre Main Building, housing exhibits related to mining, metallurgy, manufacturing, and science, and Machinery Hall, containing the exhibition's centerpiece, the giant Corliss Steam Engine. Products displayed for the first time at the exhibition included Hires root beer, Heinz ketchup, the Remington typographic machine (later dubbed the typewriter), and Alexander





By 11:45 a.m., when it came time for President Grant to make his remarks in front of Memorial Hall, there were approximately four thousand notables assembled on the grandstands behind him. Included in that illustrious group were the generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan. Over the course of the last couple of days, Grant had been badgering these two old friends about George Armstrong Custer.

Eleven years before, at the conclusion of the Civil War, it had been Custer who had spoiled what should have been Grant's finest hour. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers and spectators had gathered on a beautiful spring day for the Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac in Washington, D.C. The cavalry led the procession through the city, and as the troopers marched down Pennsylvania

Avenue toward Grant and the other dignitaries gathered in front of the White House, Custer's horse suddenly bolted from the ranks. It was later said that a bouquet of flowers thrown to Custer from an admiring young lady had startled his horse, but Grant must have had his doubts as he watched Custer gallop to the head of the parade. The only cadet at West Point to match his own record in riding and jumping a horse had been Custer, and there he was, alone in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue ostentatiously struggling to subdue his bucking steed. Whether intentionally or not, Custer had managed to make himself the center of attention.

Now, more than a decade later, in the final year of his second term as president, Grant watched in baffled rage as his administration collapsed around him amid charges of corruption and incompetence. At this dark and dismal hour, it was annoying in the extreme to have one of his own—an army officer (and Custer at that!)—contribute to the onslaught. Testifying against the secretary of war was bad enough, but to pull his brother Orville into the morass was unforgivable, and Grant had resolved to make the blond-haired prima donna pay.

He'd ordered Sheridan to detain Custer, then on his way back to Fort Lincoln, in Chicago. When word of Custer's arrest became public, the press had erupted in outrage, branding Grant the "modern Caesar." "Are officers . . . to be dragged from railroad trains and ignominiously ordered to stand aside," the *New York Herald* howled, "until the whims of the Chief magistrate . . . are satisfied?" Grant had relented, but not without putting Custer under the command of Terry, who was as moderate and serene as Custer was pompous and frenetic. Indeed, Terry, a courtly former lawyer from New Haven, Connecticut, and the only non-West Point general in the post-Civil War army, was so excruciatingly *nice* that it would more than likely drive Custer to distraction. At least that was the hope.

At almost precisely noon on May 10, 1876, at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Grant stepped up to the podium in front of Memorial Hall and began to read from several legal-sized sheets of paper. The acoustics outside this modern-day coliseum were atrocious, and no one beyond the second row could hear a word he said. When he finished his ten-minute speech, the few isolated cheers only underscored what the writer William Dean Howells later described in the pages of the *Atlantic* as "the silent indifference" of the crowd's reception.

It was astonishing how far Grant had plummeted. After winning the war for Lincoln, he seemed on the brink of even greater accomplishments as president of the United States. With input from the Quakers, he'd adopted what he described as "an Indian policy founded on peace and Christianity rather than force of arms." He even appointed his friend Ely Parker, a full-blooded Seneca, as commissioner of Indian affairs. But as it turned out, Parker lasted only a few years before a toxic mixture of greed and politics poisoned every one of Grant's best intentions.

It was more than a little ironic. Despite all he'd hoped to do for the Indians, his administration now found itself in the midst of a squalid little war against the embattled Sioux and Cheyenne of the northern plains. In the end, he had been powerless to stop the American push for more. Not that he had tried very hard or refused to let his own administration participate in the pillage, but it must have been sad and infuriating to see America's celebration of its centennial come down to this: the rude, derisive silence of several thousand people withholding their applause.

On May 10, 1876, the same day that President Grant spoke in Philadelphia, Custer and General Terry arrived at Bismarck. From there they took the ferry across the Missouri River to Fort Lincoln: a ramshackle collection of wooden buildings surrounding a muddy parade ground with the wide brown ditch of the river flowing beside it.

There was room at Fort Lincoln for only a portion of the regiment, so a small city of tents had sprung up beside it. In addition to the twelve companies of the Seventh Cavalry, there were several companies of infantry housed in nearby Fort McKeen. Sixty-five Arikara Indian scouts, who lived with their families at Fort Lincoln in a hamlet of log huts, were also participating in the campaign along with 114 teamsters and their large canvas-topped wagons, each pulled by six mules and containing between three thousand and five thousand pounds of forage. General Terry, who had gained fame near the close of the Civil War by leading an impeccably organized assault on the supposed impregnable Confederate stronghold at Fort Fisher, estimated that the column's sixteen hundred horses and mules required a staggering twelve thousand pounds of grain a day. By his calculations they might need every one of these wagons before reaching the Yellowstone River, where they would be replenished by the *Far West*.

There were hopes, however, that this might be a short campaign. One hundred and fifty miles to the west, approximately halfway between Fort Lincoln and their rendezvous point on the Yellowstone was the Little Missouri River. According to a recent scouting report, Sitting Bull was encamped somewhere along this river with fifteen hundred lodges and three thousand warriors. A force that size would have outnumbered the Seventh Cavalry's approximately 750 officers and enlisted men by about four to one. But Custer did not appear concerned. As he'd bragged to a group of businessmen in New York City that spring, the Seventh Cavalry "could whip and defeat all the Indians on the plains."

By most accounts, Custer was bubbling with even more than the usual enthusiasm when he arrived at Fort Lincoln with his niece and nephew from Monroe, Michigan, and with two canaries for his wife Libbie. One soldier described him as "happy as a boy with a new red sled." General Grant had done his best to ruin him, but thanks to the intercession of what he called "Custer luck," he was back at Fort Lincoln and on the cusp of yet another one of his spectacular comebacks. The presence of General Terry was certainly a bother, but he had surmounted worse obstacles in the past.

In the nine years since Custer chased his first buffalo across the plains of Kansas, his career had zigged and zagged like the Missouri River. His first summer in the West in 1867 had been filled with frustration. The Cheyenne had made a mockery of his attempts to pursue them. When his men began to desert wholesale for the goldfields to the west, Custer overreacted and ordered some of them shot. But it was the long absence from his wife that finally undid him. At least at night, Libbie had spent much of the Civil War by her husband's side, but this wasn't possible when chasing Indians across the plains. At one point, Custer abandoned his regiment and dashed to Libbie, covering more than 150 miles on horseback in just sixty hours. From Libbie's standpoint, it was all wonderfully romantic and resulted in what she later remembered as "one long perfect day," but it almost ruined Custer's career. He was court-martialed and sentenced to a year's unpaid leave.

Outwardly, Custer remained unrepentant, claiming he'd been made a scapegoat for the failings of his superiors. Still, for a former major general who was now, under the diminished circumstances of the peacetime army, a mere lieutenant colonel (although, for courtesy's sake, he was still addressed as General Custer), this was a potentially disastrous development. Then, as happened time and again throughout his career, came the intervention of the miraculous bolt from the blue called Custer luck.



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