

Section II: Wars of Expansion

Title: Two Perspectives on the Battle of Little Bighorn/Greasy Grass

Grade Level: Middle School

Objectives: Understand different perspectives of the Battle of Little Bighorn/Greasy Grass. Consider the evidence available to determine which account most accurately describes the battle.

National History Standards:

Standard 2: Student comprehends a variety of historical sources;
Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation; Era 6:4: The student understands various perspectives on federal Indian policy, westward expansion, and the resulting struggles.

Time: 45 minutes

Background:

In 1868, the United States made a treaty with the Sioux nation—a loose confederacy that included the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples—that confined them to a reservation. The Treaty of Fort Laramie promised that the Black Hills, which the Sioux considered sacred, would forever be part of their reservation and closed to white settlement. In 1874, however, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led an expedition that verified rumors of rich gold deposits there. Prospectors quickly began to trespass on Indian land and stake illegal claims—then demand that the army protect them from Indian attacks.

In the summer of 1876, the U.S. Army deployed troops to the Black Hills to trap a group of roaming Sioux and force them back to their reservation. Custer's Seventh Cavalry and his Crow Indian allies were supposed to coordinate operations with other units of the expedition. But on the morning of June 25, Custer found an Indian village and decided to attack on his own. In the ensuing battle, the Seventh Cavalry was overwhelmed: more than 200 troops, including Custer, were killed. The loss so outraged the U.S. government—and the public at large—that the army mounted a new offensive, crushing armed Sioux resistance.



Custer's Last Stand Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center



Little Bighorn, by White Bird Courtesy of West Point Museum



“Look at me and look at the earth. It was our father’s and should be our children’s after us.... If the white men take my country, where can I go? I have nowhere to go. I cannot spare it, and I love it very much. Let us alone.”

—Sitting Bull,
Lakota Sioux chief, 1877

Lakota ceremonial shirt
National Museum of the American Indian



“I am inclined to think that the occupation of this region of the country is not necessary to the happiness and prosperity of the Indians, and as it is supposed to be rich in minerals and lumber it is deemed important to have it freed as early as possible from Indian occupancy.”

—Columbus Delano,
secretary of the interior, 1872

George Custer’s buckskin jacket
National Museum of American History

- Materials:**
- *Custer's Last Stand* Painting
 - Little Bighorn pictograph
 - Custer's buckskin jacket and a Lakota ceremonial shirt
 - *Harper's Weekly* Articles

Lesson:

Begin with a brief discussion of what students know about Custer and Little Bighorn/Greasy Grass. Then divide the class into five groups: U.S. government officials, leaders of the Sioux nation, U.S. Army soldiers, Sioux fighters, and historians of today.

Distribute to the students the documents and images that pertain to their particular group; give the historians all of the documents and images to review. The government officials will review the news articles; Sioux leaders and Sioux fighters the pictograph of the battle and the Sioux shirt; and the U.S. soldiers the painting of Custer, Custer's coat, and the *Harper's Weekly* news articles. Students will need to use their textbooks and other sources to help with their analysis. Refer to the bibliography in the back of this guide; you may want to have some of the suggested books already in the classroom for this activity.

Each group should use the primary sources to articulate its perspective on the Battle of Little Bighorn/Greasy Grass—and to answer questions such as: Whose point of view of the battle does this source represent? Why does the source show the battle the way it does? Who do you think the intended audience was?

The historians should develop questions to ask the other groups about their perspective on the Battle of Little Bighorn and the role their group played in the event. These should include: Was the battle necessary? Should it be called a massacre? Did Custer make the right decision to approach the village to fight the Indians? Should the U.S. Army be fighting the Sioux? Why or why not?

Have the class come back together for a discussion of the battle. In the order above, each of the four groups will explain its position in two minutes or less, using the primary sources as evidence. Then the historians will ask their prepared questions, as well as any that occurred to them during the opening statements. After the question-and-answer session, have the historians decide how to tell the story of the Battle of Little Bighorn. They should share this version—this *history*—with the class.

Follow-up Activity:

If time allows, discuss with the students what they now know—but did not previously know—about the Battle of Little Bighorn/Greasy Grass. Alternatively, have them write on a sheet of paper three things they learned about the battle. Students could also carry out further research into other major events in the western Indian Wars, such as the incident at Wounded Knee, and plot them on a timeline.

A National Disgrace

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

From *Harper's Weekly*, August 5, 1876, 630

The Montana Slaughter

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

At the Rosebud, General Custer with twelve companies of cavalry, left Terry to make a detour around by the Little Horn. This was on the 22d of June. On the 25th he struck what was probably the main camp of Sitting Bull. He had pushed forward with greater rapidity than his orders directed, and arrived at the point where a junction of the forces was intended, a day or two in advance of the infantry. Without waiting for the rest of the troops to come up, General Custer decided upon an immediate attack. The Indians were posted in a narrow ravine, about twenty miles above the mouth of the river... The Indians poured a murderous fire upon them from all sides, and not one of the detachment escaped alive. General Custer himself, his two brothers, his brother-in-law, and his nephew were all killed...

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

From *Harper's Weekly*, July 22, 1876, 598

Bibliography

General

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Section I: War of Independence

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Marrin, Albert. *George Washington and the Founding of a Nation*. Dutton Children's Books, 2001.

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Section II: Wars of Expansion

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Section III: Civil War

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Section VI: September 11 and Its Aftermath

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The Price of Freedom: Americans at War Teacher's Manual DVD Menu

***Americans at War*, produced by The History Channel**

An introduction to the themes of the exhibition

War of Independence

First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:

- Lydia Minturn Post, Long Island housewife, 1776
- James Collins, teenage soldier, no date
- Doonyontat, Wyandot chief, 1779
- Elijah Churchill, recipient of the first Purple Heart, 1783

Mexican War

First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:

- José María Tornel y Mendivil, Mexican secretary of war, 1837
- George Ballentine, English volunteer for the United States, 1853
- Juan Bautista Vigil y Alarid, acting governor of New Mexico, 1846
- Ulysses S. Grant, American soldier, 1885

Civil War

First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:

- Louis Myers, Third West Virginia Infantry, 1862
- William G. Christie, Minnesota soldier, 1863
- Eugenia Phillips, spy for the South in Washington D.C., 1861
- Spottswood Rice, African American Union soldier, 1864

World War I

World War I Overview, produced by The History Channel

World War II

World War II Cartoons, produced by The History Channel

**World War II Overviews in the Newsreel format,
produced by The History Channel**

- From World War I to World War II
- The North Atlantic and North African Theater
- The European Theater
- The Pacific Theater

The USO in World War II, produced by The History Channel

First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:

- George Hynes, U.S. Army, a last letter home, 1942
- Robert Morris, U.S. Coast Guard, fighting in Italy, 1943
- Robert Sherrod, journalist, the beach at Tarawa, 1943
- Ann Darr, Women Airforce Service Pilots, 1997
- Daniel Inouye, Medal of Honor recipient, 2000

Vietnam

**Excerpt from *Huey Helicopter—Air Armada*, The History Channel
documentary, 2002**

First-Person Accounts, produced by Arrowhead Film & Video:

- Hal Moore, commander of a Seventh Cavalry Regiment
battalion, 2003
- Fred Castleberry, veteran of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division, 2002
- Clarence Sasser, recipient of the Medal of Honor, 2004,
(produced by Pyramid Studios)



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