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Clash of Cultures as Euphemism: Avoiding History at the Little Bighorn

TIMOTHY BRAATZ

Visitors to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument on the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana quickly learn that the tragic violence that occurred between US cavalrymen and Lakota and Cheyenne families in late June 1876 was a *clash of cultures*. This catchy phrase serves as the title of historical summaries printed in the monument's brochures and as a major theme in park rangers' interpretive talks.¹ Considering the sizable number of visitors to the monument each year (more than four hundred thousand in fiscal year 2002), the prominence of "Custer's Last Stand" in American mythology, and the widespread use of the phrase *clash of cultures* to explain historical conflict between Indians and non-Indians, a careful examination of the phrase as currently employed at the Little Bighorn is necessary.² The Little Bighorn monument is a site of great controversy, a centerpiece in the nation's late-twentieth-century "culture wars," and park personnel have been in a seemingly no-win situation. Still, the historical interpretation currently offered at the park should not be above critique—even if it feels like piling on. The intent here is to deconstruct *clash of cultures* to show how it hides more than it reveals, to consider why the phrase is used, and to evaluate the implications of such language. Finally, this article suggests an alternative way of framing the Battle of Little Bighorn, one that might better fulfill the congressional call "to encourage peace among peoples of all races."³

CLASH OF CULTURES

The history of Indian-white relations, on the Northern Plains and elsewhere, is multifaceted and complex, but the *clash of cultures* interpretation simplifies the story. Under the heading "A Clash of Cultures," the monument's 2002 visitor brochure categorizes the Little Bighorn battle as "but the latest encounter in a centuries-old conflict between Indian and white cultures." It was "one of

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the last armed efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to preserve their traditional way of life against the encroachment of white civilization.”⁴ The language is familiar and, lacking more specific qualifiers, the implications are clear: Indian cultures, from sixteenth-century Timucuas and seventeenth-century Pequots to eighteenth-century Tlingits and nineteenth-century Arapahoes, shared certain essential traits hostile to non-Indian influence. Indian life was static; Indians were unwilling to change and so resisted the unstoppable spread of “civilization” in a futile attempt to maintain their, it follows, uncivilized state. Regarding the Lakota-US conflict, “A Clash of Cultures” tells monument visitors that because the different ways of life were irretrievably incompatible, a violent showdown was inevitable.⁵

How were the cultures different? The brochure does not say, and the monument’s museum provides only a few clues. One of the museum displays describes the “people of the plains” as nomadic hunters and spiritual people organized in “a complex democracy of blood relatives, family clans, societies, bands, and tribes contributing to mutual support in a harsh environment.” There is no such summary of the supposedly opposing way of life and little explanation of the points at which late-nineteenth-century US culture and Northern Plains cultures “clashed.” The displays do allow a comparison of material cultures, particularly weaponry or “tools of battle.” Guns, lances, clothing, tools, and various archeological artifacts of Indian and non-Indian origin appear—the typical fare of museums of the American West. The physical differences are obvious, but they reveal little about the motives, beliefs, and practices that led to violent conflict. Besides, Cheyennes and Lakotas possessed numerous American-made firearms, clothes items, and blankets. The interpretive talks similarly emphasize material culture, along with the unfolding of action in the historic battle. Silly as it seems, this emphasis, taken to its logical conclusion, implies that the clash entailed the hostility that inevitably must develop between people who carry revolvers and people who carry bows, between people who wear boots—General Custer’s pair is prominently displayed—and people who wear moccasins.⁶

The shortcomings of the brief brochures, ranger talks, and a regrettably small museum aside, the *clash of cultures* interpretation of the Little Bighorn provides few meaningful insights regarding causation. A variety of “cultures” were represented at the battle. On one side were Lakotas (sometimes called Tetons or Western Sioux), Northern Cheyennes, and a few Northern Arapahos, and their lifeways were not identical.⁷ The other side of the battle lines was also quite diverse. The Seventh US Cavalry included American men from fast-growing industrial cities, others from northern farms, and a few raised in the slave-owning South. A sizable minority of the soldiers were European-born, with many hailing from Germany or Ireland.⁸ Broad generalization—Northern Plains culture versus Euro-American culture—appears to hold the argument together but cannot explain why members of two other Northern Plains peoples, the Crows and Arikaras, served as scouts on the Euro-American side. The presence of these strange bedfellows—Germans and Crows—seriously challenges the notion of inevitable hostility across broad cultural lines.⁹

In truth, cultural similarities and differences alone are no determining factor in the outbreak of military conflict and do not fully explain violence between American Indians and US citizens in the nineteenth century. Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Cherokees, and Seminoles—in varying degrees—practiced commercial agriculture, owned slaves, converted to Protestant Christianity, intermarried with non-Indians, cooperated with US military forces, and spoke English. US citizens called them the “Civilized Tribes,” meaning “people like us,” but still forcibly drove them out of the Southeast.¹⁰ Looking back at the US conquest of the continent, it is hard to imagine an Indian presence in any shape or form that would not have “clashed” with American expectations.¹¹

Culture, as presented by the National Park Service (NPS) at the Little Bighorn, is simply too vague to hold much explanatory value. Even the museum’s brief description of the “people of the plains” hints at the relevance of religious beliefs, kin relations, social organization, power structures, economic strategies, and identity concepts. One might also add language, worldview, gender constructions, social norms and values, and symbolic meanings; in other words, socially constructed and transmitted knowledge and behavior.¹² If *culture* encompasses all these constructs and more, as it undoubtedly does, then practically all conflict between human groups is in one way or another a *clash of cultures*. In the monument literature, with “culture” undefined, this phrase explains everything and nothing. *Culture* is a reification, a handy way to categorize people’s beliefs, values, and perceptions, but it is not a concrete entity. Cultures do not clash; cultures do not even act—people do. It was Lieutenant Colonel Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, not “white civilization,” who charged the large encampment along the Greasy Grass River. It was Crazy Horse and other Lakota and Cheyenne men, not Northern Plains “culture,” who rode out to stop them.¹³ Why these people fought at the Little Bighorn, why the US Army undertook the campaign of 1876 against Lakota and Cheyenne families, are questions, finally, for history, not for convenient abstractions.

CONTROVERSY AT THE PARK

The fundamental historical context of the battle is no mystery. In the 1860s and 1870s thousands of US citizens invaded Lakota territory to prospect for gold, build railroads, hunt bison, and establish military posts. To acquire control of Lakota land, the US government employed two strategies: purchase through treaty and, when Lakotas declined to sell, military conquest. Over time the US advantages of population, industrial power, and organization wore down Lakota resistance. Despite the Indian victory at the Little Bighorn, the campaign of 1876 essentially completed US conquest of the region.¹⁴ The broader historical context is also well documented and not particularly controversial among scholars, but unfortunately the NPS has left it aside.¹⁵ Notably glaring omissions include the expansion of Lakota power on the Northern Plains before the 1870s; the political, economic, and military interests that promoted US acquisition of Lakota lands; and the

manifest destiny ideology used to justify the US government's transcontinental imperialism.¹⁶

As scholars know, no historical study can thoroughly address all the relevant issues, events, and perspectives. The telling and retelling of history is inevitably biased as historians must choose which questions to ask of their sources and, of necessity, are constantly deciding which information to include and which to leave out. This basic historiographical principle invites further deconstruction of the interpretive choices made at the Little Bighorn: Why does the NPS offer a simplistic *clash of cultures* rather than an informed historical perspective? Why does it present a historical summary that, as explained below, is vague and misleading, particularly regarding human motivation? The monument brochures and museum cannot contain a vast dissertation, but, all the same, the choices they represent have implications. The object of this discussion is not to trace thoroughly the history of the battlefield and the evolution of the NPS interpretive presentation at the monument; that has been done elsewhere.¹⁷ A brief review is necessary, however, for understanding how *clash of cultures* came to be seen as an appropriately "neutral" interpretation of a politically charged site and the historical event it represents.

The NPS took over management of "Custer Battlefield" in 1940, and early park superintendents presented a "brave soldier" interpretation, drawing parallels between the service and sacrifice of Custer and his men and the participation of US soldiers in World War II and the early Cold War.¹⁸ This approach generally identified Native Americans as hostile obstacles to national development and celebrated their successful transformation from resentful savages to grateful citizens.¹⁹ With the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, however, including the emergence of American Indian activists and greater public interest in Native practices and history, the NPS gradually made room for alternative voices at the Little Bighorn. Beginning in the early 1970s, changes included the use of Black Elk's quote "Know the power that is peace"; inclusion of Indian perspectives, both historic and contemporary, in battlefield interpretation; and a new heading—"A Conflict of Cultures"—for visitor brochures.²⁰

The new interpretive program, in particular the honoring of Lakota and Cheyenne participants while deemphasizing the person and symbol of Custer (the park museum was no longer a Custer shrine) attracted bitter complaints from so-called Custerphiles, including some who considered Custer's adversaries to be national enemies.²¹ And despite the changes, the continued memorialization of Custer and his troops, even as park personnel rejected calls for an on-site Indian memorial, brought protest from critics of the US Army's motivations and intentions in the campaign of 1876. In 1976 the public debate was particularly intense, with a centennial commemoration at the battlefield coinciding with the national bicentennial. Some prominent observers sharply criticized the NPS for being pro-Indian and anti-Custer, Native groups held alternative ceremonies and condemned the monument for celebrating genocide, and it seemed no one was pleased.²²

If the pendulum of interpretation, as several historians have described it, continued moving from the brave soldier framework toward greater focus on Indian concerns, it was a slow and unsteady swing.²³ In 1986 a park management plan called for less emphasis on Custer Hill, site of the “Last Stand,” and more consideration of Native perspectives.²⁴ The following year the Custer Battlefield visitor brochure was substantially revised, updating it to a standardized NPS format of images and brief essays. The new brochure featured a reproduction of Eric Von Schmidt’s carefully researched painting *Here Fell Custer*, which kept the emphasis on Custer’s demise but drew complaints for not properly glorifying him.²⁵ Also in the new brochure, the heading “A Conflict of Cultures” was replaced with “A Clash of Cultures,” which had become a major theme of the interpretive program.²⁶ This change in terminology subtly drew attention away from a broad war of conquest, whose righteousness was no longer safely axiomatic, and annunciated instead a single, tragic skirmish.

Not everyone, though, was willing to embrace the battle while losing the war. In 1988, during an anniversary ceremony at the park, a group of protesters, including Russell Means of the American Indian Movement, cemented a welded iron plaque into the ground next to the Seventh Cavalry burial memorial. The plaque read, “In honor of our Indian Patriots who fought and defeated the U.S. Calvary [*sic*]. In order to save our women and children from mass-murder. In doing so, preserving our rights to our Homelands, Treaties and Sovereignty.” Park superintendent Dennis Ditmanson was caught in the middle of an emotional dispute, not wanting to condone this provocative act or even the language of the plaque yet also supporting the idea of an Indian monument. His solution was to remove the plaque from the grave site and display it in the museum while calling for a permanent memorial to honor the historical Indian participants.²⁷

In 1989 Barbara Booher (Northern Ute/Cherokee) became the first Native superintendent at the park, and she was followed by a second Native, Gerard Baker (Mandan-Hidatsa), in 1993.²⁸ Under their leadership the park strengthened its relationship with Northern Plains Indian communities, encouraged more Native participation in park ceremonies, and emphasized Native perspectives in the interpretive programs.²⁹ If the changes in the 1980s had troubled the Custerphiles, the Indian superintendents left them outraged, as did the 1991 congressional legislation that changed the park’s name to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and authorized creation of an Indian memorial; Baker even received death threats.³⁰ But calmer observers also expressed discomfort with the nature of park programs. In 1997 historian Paul Hutton, working for the Organization of American Historians, described “breathtaking changes” made by Baker. Even as he praised Baker’s leadership, Hutton criticized the interpretive program for offering a talk on military tactics that was “almost totally Indian centered,” forwarding the argument that Custer had attacked women and children, and giving control of bus tours to the local Crow Indian college.³¹ Baker defended his approach, saying, “I am not ‘Indianizing’ the battlefield. I am educating visitors about both sides of the story. Although the battle was won by the

Indians, it was looked on as a very negative place that forever changed their way of life. Here, their freedom ended.”³²

Despite the sharp criticism, Booher and Baker broadened the political spectrum of acceptable voices at the park. In 1998 Neil Mangum, a non-Indian, became park superintendent. As park historian in the 1980s, Mangum had emphasized the *clash of cultures* interpretation over the Custer story, and some Custerphiles had called for his removal, but now he was welcomed back as a moderate.³³ Mangum, who served as superintendent until 2002, emphasized “neutrality” in the park’s interpretive program, meaning that Indian and cavalry perspectives alike should be presented to park visitors. But the emphasis on neutrality and balance did not eliminate the criticism—the site’s symbolism was too strong, the competing interests too entrenched. Michael Donahue, a seasonal ranger, explained, “This is one of the most controversial parks in the country. It’s a very difficult place to work.”³⁴

A POSITION OF NEUTRALITY

So if offering historical interpretation has been a thankless task in recent decades, the *clash of cultures* interpretation is an understandable solution, a seemingly safe choice for park personnel. To put it baldly, indicting reified *culture* and thereby positing inevitability appears to offer neutrality and invites less controversy because it avoids the complexity of history. Most critical, *clash of cultures* leaves room for idealized or ideologically neat views of the past by allowing for consideration of all historical participants, Indian and non-Indian, while sidestepping questions of individual human responsibility.³⁵ More than three hundred men met violent death at the Little Bighorn, and thousands more, including numerous women and children, died in the US conquest of the Northern Plains tribes. As currently presented at the monument, however, no individual decision makers were behind the violence; no one was guilty of planning, promoting, or instigating death—it was “culture.”³⁶

For example, the monument brochures suggest that the original source of the conflict, the trespass on Lakota lands by US civilians, was the result of a cultural misunderstanding: “These western emigrants, possessing little or no understanding of the Indian way of life, showed slight regard for the sanctity of hunting grounds or the terms of former treaties. The Indians’ resistance to those encroachments on their domain only served to intensify hostilities.”³⁷ If US emigrants had understood Lakotas, the language implies, the whole unhappy sequence would not have transpired. But this is not convincing. If emigrant families had realized how dependent Lakotas were on bison, would they have found a different route to the Pacific coast?³⁸ If gold seekers knew Lakotas considered the Black Hills sacred, would they have stayed away?³⁹ The emigrants’ worldview may have included an ignorance of “the Indian way of life”; it also drew on a racism that typically categorized Indians as subhuman “savages” doomed to extinction. By blaming “culture” without identifying its uglier attributes, the monument brochures avoid tarnishing that enduring American icon, the westering pioneer family.

Blaming “culture” also means not having to examine the role of Custer and Gen. Phil Sheridan in implementing “total war” against Plains tribes.⁴⁰ Instead, the battlefield brochures employ passive voice and half-truths to skirt any serious discussion of army responsibility beyond the immediate events of the battle: “*Peace, however, was not to last. In 1874 gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the heart of the new Indian reservation. News of the strike spread quickly, and soon thousands of eager gold seekers swarmed into the region in violation of the Fort Laramie treaty. The army tried to keep them out, but to no avail!*” (emphases added). There is no mention of Custer leading the mineral hunt in the Black Hills, no evaluation of the army and President Grant’s declining commitment to stop the illegal gold rush: “When the Indians did not comply [with Bureau of Indian Affairs dictates], the army *was called in to enforce the orders*” (emphasis added).⁴¹ The Indians, this suggests, were the violators, and an otherwise disinterested army represented legitimate authority.⁴² Regarding Custer’s 1868 attack on Cheyenne and Arapaho encampments—part of Sheridan’s “total war”—the brochures cannot even manage a complete sentence: “Engaged in the Battle of the Washita November 27, 1868.” That is a clear example of avoiding controversy.⁴³ Discussion of Custer’s role is limited to the mysteries of the battlefield:

One of the tantalizing and intriguing aspects of the Battle of the Little Bighorn is what happened to two of Custer’s companies whose remains were found in and along the trail leading to Deep Ravine. Historians have pondered their *fate* ever since. Some claim they were attempting to drive the Indians off the lower ridges; others declare they were trying to signal their position to the rest of the command (Reno and Benteen’s battalions); still others maintain they were attempting to escape the awful *fate* that awaited them. No one knows. As you walk the lower ridges, perhaps you will develop your own ideas on the fight. One thing is for certain—*nobody can totally prove or disprove your theory* (emphases added).⁴⁴

So the monument encourages visitors to wonder “What were Custer’s men doing in their desperate, final moments” instead of “Why were Custer’s men attacking Lakota families?” Notice how the word *fate*, appearing twice, subtly reiterates inevitability. Custer is no longer canonized, and Custerphiles may still lament the park’s name change, but a visitor encumbered with romantic images of a dashing hero—all impeccable courage and honorable intentions—will likely not leave disappointed or dismayed, no theory being invalid.⁴⁵

As for the enlisted men of the Seventh Cavalry, Manguam recently explained, “They were soldiers doing their job, following their culture.”⁴⁶ Again, blaming “culture” leaves actual motivations unscrutinized. US troopers endured punishing conditions, suffered overbearing officers like Custer, and risked life and limb in their campaigns on the Plains. In enlisting, they ceded personal freedom and agreed to follow orders as men of war, even if the targets were noncombatants. What was the draw? Men may have enlisted for any number of personal reasons, and service against Indian groups in the

West offered adventure and access to the region, but wages were probably the strongest enticement. The presence of numerous unskilled laborers, many of them immigrants, suggests this was mostly an army of job seekers, men for hire, not patriots and crusaders.⁴⁷ Despite regular wages, however, US troopers were not the real beneficiaries of their bloody labors. They were killing and dying in the “Spirit of Sixty-two”—the year of the Pacific Railroad Grant and the Homestead Act—securing immense acreage for railroad companies, land speculators, and settler families; the Northern Pacific Railroad eventually received forty million acres on the Northern Plains.⁴⁸ This perspective can quickly undermine any “winning of the West” triumphalism: What is one to think of a political economy that includes a federal government hiring working-class men to wage war, at times against families, to boost corporate gains? Perhaps capitalist structures, class inequalities, and ruthless profit seeking are part of the “culture” that “clashed” with Lakota tribalism. The NPS presentation does not say.

If *clash of cultures* protects romantic views of Custer and westward expansion by not offering evidence to the contrary, it likewise perpetuates uncritical understanding of Plains peoples courageously and stubbornly defending “ancestral” homelands and a “traditional way of life.”⁴⁹ But Lakotas had, in the preceding two hundred years, moved west out of the Upper Midwest woodlands to trap beaver in the Missouri River drainage, acquired European-introduced guns and horses, tried horticultural village life, and eventually developed a bison-hunting lifestyle.⁵⁰ *Clash of cultures* postulates differences, but Lakotas and Americans had similarities too, among them the prominence of war making. At times Lakotas used warfare, even destroyed foreign villages and killed noncombatants, to acquire and maintain control of regional trade and valuable lands at the expense of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, Crows, and others.⁵¹ Lakotas celebrated superiority over other groups and encouraged and rewarded the use of violence by their men. Indeed, war honors often led to positions of prestige, influence, and leadership.⁵² One monument brochure describes Lakota leader Sitting Bull as “an accomplished hunter and warrior” and “a champion of traditional Lakota culture,” known for his “wisdom and eloquence.”⁵³ Perhaps that was true, but one should keep in mind what being a skilled “warrior” meant: At age fourteen, Sitting Bull earned his first coup feather by splitting a man’s skull with a tomahawk; on another occasion he shot a man in the belly and then scalped him. He eventually acquired thirty coup feathers.⁵⁴ Lakota-US conflict began as the collision of two expanding powers, a point not lost on Black Hawk, an earlier Lakota leader. At the Fort Laramie Treaty Council in 1851, Black Hawk explained, “These lands once belonged to the Kiowas and the Crows, but we whipped these nations out of them, and in this we do what the white men do when they want the lands of the Indians.”⁵⁵ And Lakotas understood that their embrace of warfare meant their own villages might come under attack.⁵⁶ But for those who view Lakotas only as victims of US policy and power, as the noble antithesis to American greed and savagery, the *clash of cultures* dichotomy presents no unsettling corrective.⁵⁷ All told, individual attitudes, motivations, and intentions were benign in this *clash of cultures*: US civilians were merely ignorant,

the US Army was working—against destiny apparently—for peace, and Lakotas were defending their rightful, deserved homes.

Just as blaming cultural differences removes human agency, it also makes broad historical context unnecessary. In this fashion, *clash of cultures* downplays some of the political implications that make the battlefield such a potent symbol. A forthright presentation of US expansionism in the nineteenth century would remind monument visitors that the country's territorial growth and wealth depended on the dispossession of Native peoples. Carefully spelling out the treaty violations associated with the US conquest of the Northern Plains would show that Sioux nations, not public and private interests, have the strongest legal claims to vast swaths of the region, even today. And it follows that federal Indian policy is in many ways responsible for the ugliness of postconquest relations, from the Wounded Knee slaughter in 1890 to the Wounded Knee standoff in 1973 to current reservation conditions.⁵⁸ Put another way, the history of conquest points to the legacy of conquest: The Little Bighorn battle was more a beginning than an end. These are controversial assertions not because they are unsupported by facts but because they raise questions about the very nature of the American state—questions many citizens would rather not consider.⁵⁹

And there are other issues. Although US foreign policy toward distant nation-states has often claimed justification in notions of “American exceptionalism,” moral ambiguity regarding the US push into Indian lands before 1880 can easily translate into criticism of the ongoing proliferation of US military bases across the globe that began after 1880.⁶⁰ Indeed, in the 1970s, critics of the US occupation of Vietnam were drawing new parallels, suggesting continuity between the American invasion of Indian lands and the American invasion of Asian lands.⁶¹ However, the mere mention of the more sordid aspects of the US government's foreign relations can bring condemnation, often from well-placed ideologues who complain of “political correctness” and “anti-Americanism” to discourage such investigation.⁶² These seem likely considerations, at both the conscious and subconscious levels, for federally employed interpreters addressing such a volatile topic. Obviously, park visitors can and will draw their own conclusions, but interpretive vagueness allows NPS personnel to claim “neutrality” and stay a little closer to the edges of a political minefield.⁶³ As Mangum put it, “We've taken a position of absolute neutrality.”⁶⁴ *Clash of cultures* is used, then, because it is a euphemism; it seeks to minimize controversy, discomfort, and offense.

And yet for the very same reasons, *clash of cultures* does offend. In denying history, it does a disservice to impoverished Native communities still struggling under the burdens of that history. Forwarding a sanitized and simplistic story, it insults the intelligence, moral capacity, and historical curiosity of monument visitors. (Imagine such ambiguity at a Holocaust memorial: alas, Jewish culture versus German culture.) When park rangers insist that the Little Bighorn is a “pristine battlefield,” they may mean the archeological record is relatively undisturbed, but a trope is at work: *Clash of cultures* makes clean. *Clash of cultures* also offends by perpetuating some of the same assumptions that led to the Little Bighorn bloodbath in the first place. By serving up inevitability, it says

Indians were disappearing, the US government was destined to rule the continent, and nothing is to be learned here.⁶⁵ Pleasantly focusing on battlefield intrigue, it contributes to the normalization of violence that made a bloody conquest acceptable, even laudable, and that continues to permeate and ravage US society.⁶⁶ The NPS can, as one brochure puts it, “provide for the enjoyment” of monument visitors while leaving them generally unchallenged.⁶⁷ In this sense, in leaning away from controversy the Little Bighorn monument leans toward another *clash*, one public historians, teachers, and social critics face every day. That is, the interpretive program may reflect the tension between the pleasures of entertainment and self-satisfaction and the task of serious investigation and introspection, between the indulgence of euphemism and the demands of history, with park interpreters caught in the middle, trying to educate and challenge yet not provoke or offend.⁶⁸

For example, on 10 July 2002 as on many summer days, monument visitors could hear seasonal ranger Donahue, in his thirteenth summer at the park, present the “Battle Talk.” As monument policy required, Donahue mentioned the “pristine battlefield” and *clash of cultures*—the latter constituting “two peoples that didn’t understand each other and didn’t much like each other”—then told an entertaining story of troop movements and Custer’s dramatic demise. In conclusion, however, Donahue made a shift so abrupt it seemed almost a non sequitur. This battle, he observed, is “a window to our historic past.” He asked his audience to remember why they were at this particular spot, and then, in one sentence, he said more about the broad historical context and its current implications than do the monument brochures and museum combined. “It’s because of greed, racism, hatred, ethnocentrism,” he declared, “and maybe someday we can overcome it.”⁶⁹

THE BIG HOLE COUNTERPOINT

The interpretive program at Big Hole National Battlefield in southwestern Montana provides a counterpoint to the Little Bighorn’s *clash of cultures*. The memorialized events at the two sites are remarkably similar. In August 1877 Col. John Gibbon directed a predawn assault by the Seventh US Infantry on Nez Perce families camped along the Big Hole River.⁷⁰ As on the Northern Plains, US soldiers were forcing open Indian lands for gold miners and other non-Indian interests and, as at the Little Bighorn, the attackers at Big Hole got more of a fight than they expected. Nez Perce defenders drove the 162 infantrymen and 34 civilian volunteers out of the village and pinned them on a nearby hill for twenty-four hours, killing 29 and wounding 40. The Nez Perce fighters may have won the battle, but the villagers suffered 60 to 90 casualties, mostly noncombatants, and the tragic affair hastened their final defeat.⁷¹ Despite the obvious parallels, Big Hole is nothing like the Little Bighorn in American mythology and imagination—the difference, no doubt, having much to do with Custer—and the Big Hole park has been spared the close scrutiny and enduring controversy known to Little Bighorn personnel (although in 1951 a historian and critic of the Big Hole presentation did cement a plaque into the battlefield to honor the Nez Perce killed there).

Perhaps for this reason, the Big Hole interpretive program—park brochures, museum, video screening—offers more historical content for park visitors. Visitors at the two parks receive similar full-color brochures—standardized NPS format, battlefield maps and photos, a dramatic painting.⁷² The brochures are the same size, and each contains a seven-hundred-word essay describing the events immediately preceding and the actions during the memorialized battle. The Big Hole brochure, however, includes a thousand-word essay entitled “A Long Journey to Surrender,” recounting the broader historical context, whereas the Little Bighorn brochure manages only a three-hundred-word essay, the vague and misleading “A Clash of Cultures.” The Big Hole essay is not above unfortunate simplifications—“The Nez Perce War was a result of cultural conflicts”—but at least it explores human motivation: “Calling it their Manifest Destiny, settlers, stockmen, and gold miners began moving onto Nez Perce lands” and later, “wanting more of the Nez Perce’s land, [they] forced a new treaty in 1863 that reduced the reservation to one-tenth its original size.” Facing US military power, the Nez Perce chiefs worked for peaceful accommodation of Bureau of Indian Affairs demands, but they were undermined when “three young warriors, seeking revenge, attacked several white settlers who earlier had cheated or killed members of their families. Other warriors soon joined them, killing 17 in two days of raids.” The retaliatory violence led to Nez Perce flight, the Big Hole battle, and final surrender. This is a more precise retelling than *clash of cultures*, and the essay concludes by inviting readers to ponder broader implications: “It is a dramatic example of the price paid in human lives for the westward expansion of our nation.” The Big Hole trail guide is even more direct:

Not every soldier or volunteer who fought here was convinced that the Nez Perce were a deserving enemy, and some clearly disagreed with Gibbon’s implications of a military victory. Others, however, believed that the benefits of subduing or assimilating American Indian tribes was of primary importance to the expanding United States. For them, no individual person’s or group’s horrors was too great a price to pay. Can you discover similar philosophical differences, and their consequences, in national and international events today?⁷³

The pointedness of the Big Hole publications and Donahue’s talk at the Little Bighorn suggests that most visitors to the parks are not alienated by the ambiguities and challenges of complex history. According to one Big Hole ranger, the provocative trail guide statement had elicited no serious complaint in the past five years.⁷⁴ The Little Bighorn interpretive program, by comparison, has been prisoner to the polarized and politicized voices of Custerphiles and Custer critics and what one scholar has called their competing “patriotism of power and patriotism of pain.”⁷⁵

INDIAN MEMORIAL

Recently, a “patriotism of inclusion” has begun to emerge at the Little Bighorn.⁷⁶ On 25 June 2003, with great fanfare, the NPS officially dedicated an Indian memorial at the park. The 1991 name-change legislation had called for construction of an Indian memorial, but it took ten more years and Superintendent Mangum’s lobbying for Congress to approve public funds for the project.⁷⁷ The new memorial, located on Last Stand Hill, officially and symbolically acknowledges the humanity of Indians and the legitimacy of their participation on both sides of the battle. The primary architectural element of the monument is a circular stone wall with a narrow opening that faces the Seventh Cavalry memorial, also on the hill about seventy yards away. Designer John Collins calls the opening a “weeping wound” or “spirit gate” that welcomes the slain soldiers. He has explained, “I was trying to start a dialogue between the two monuments.”⁷⁸ Atop the wall sits a bronze sculpture of three Native men riding into battle, with a woman handing the third rider a shield. The sculpture, designed by Colleen Cutschall (Oglala–Sicangu Lakota), follows the Plains pictographic style traditionally used in painting designs on tipis.⁷⁹

As one might expect, the memorial design is not without controversy. Some Native voices have argued that the memorial, conceived of by a non-Indian architect, does not accurately represent Northern Plains practices. They point out that “weeping wound” and “spirit gate” are not Native concepts and insist that Lakota and Cheyenne fighters would not have bothered with hide shields to counter metal bullets.⁸⁰ Of the sculpture Cutschall has said, “The requirement was for three warriors. Three doesn’t work for aboriginal people, with all the Christian overtones, but there was no room for a fourth horse. Adding the woman adds a measure of narrative. She’s fulfilling the role women have always fulfilled and that’s supporting men in warfare. The shield is a microcosm of all the people of the medicine wheel in the Plains. It symbolizes a way of life.”⁸¹ Even the location of the memorial has drawn criticism—some believe the Indian memorial desecrates Last Stand Hill, and others view the emphasis on reconciliation as insulting to Lakotas and Cheyennes who were defending their families and homelands against hostile invasion.⁸²

Mostly, though, the very existence of an Indian memorial has received positive reviews. Current park superintendent Darrell Cook (Oglala Lakota) observed, “Regardless of what people think of the artistry of it or the design, the one thing we constantly hear is the meaning of it. It’s a recognition to these people who fought and died preserving their culture and way of life.”⁸³ Park ranger Patrick Hill (Crow) believes the Indian memorial will make Indians feel more welcome at the park.⁸⁴ Kevin Connelly, president of the Custer Battlefield and Museum Association, seems satisfied: “The monument is appropriate. Some think there could have been a better place for it, but for the most part our members accept it. The fight is over.”⁸⁵ A year earlier Donahue had observed, “There was a lot less tension because they are building the Indian memorial. It relieves a lot of animosity that people bring to the battlefield.”⁸⁶

Indeed, the dedication ceremony theme was “Peace through Unity,” and Congressman Dennis Rehberg told the gathered crowd, “We must stop fighting old wars.”⁸⁷ In lobbying for congressional funding, Mangum argued that the Indian wars should not be viewed as whites against Indians but as “Americans fighting Americans for control of the land.”⁸⁸ Perhaps this new patriotism of inclusion will make the park less controversial and allow park personnel to discard *clash of cultures* and present a more insightful historical analysis, one that meets the congressional direction, spelled out in the Indian memorial legislation, “to provide visitors with an improved understanding of the events leading up to and consequences of the fateful battle, and to encourage peace among peoples of all races.”⁸⁹ Superintendent Cook said, “Until there’s something actually on the ground that recognizes the Indians, you can’t tell the story to as large a number of people. This memorial will do that.”⁹⁰ But recognizing the need for more disclosive historical context he warned, “There is a lot more to do. We need to bring more balance to the larger story.”⁹¹

TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

One final criticism: This developing rapprochement is not without flaws. The “Americans versus Americans” interpretation may serve an honorable purpose, but it is clearly a “fable of inclusion.”⁹² Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were not US citizens, had no interest in becoming citizens, and were leading a struggle against submission to US sovereignty; they were not calling for unity. “Peace through Unity” sounds appealing today—and US citizenship suggests a basis for unity—but the celebration at the park more than hinted at a patriotism based on a common enemy. Blackhawk assault helicopters flew over in a show of US military power, and the dedication ceremony paid tribute to PFC Lori Piestewa, a Hopi woman killed in the recent US invasion of Iraq. The Hopi communities in northern Arizona, of course, had nothing to do with the Little Bighorn battle or the Plains wars. Her inclusion is an echo of the brave soldier interpretation but with Indians now included among the soldiers’ ranks.⁹³

This, then, may be the lesson of the evolving interpretive program at the Little Bighorn. Under pressure to include more perspectives, NPS interpreters have found ways to incorporate the formerly excluded into the dominant paradigm without fundamentally altering the paradigm—in this case, militaristic and expansionist nationalism.⁹⁴ *Clash of cultures* makes room for Native perspectives on the Little Bighorn while using inevitability to soften discussion of transcontinental imperialism. The “Peace through Unity” ceremony asked all sides “to seek the peace that Black Elk spoke of” and promptly honored cooperation in overseas invasion rather than, say, cooperation in community building or environmental preservation.⁹⁵ A monument to a tragic battle continues to promote an ideology that leads to more tragic battles. Those who reject militaristic nationalism and its destructive qualities must constantly challenge and expose the euphemisms and other imprecise language used to manufacture public support for or discourage criticism of the paradigm.

So one should ask, what is this “peace” all about? Is it simply a narrow, negative peace—the absence of war between the US government and Indian nations who now cooperate in war making—or are Congress and the NPS calling for a positive peace that includes institutions, policies, and practices that promote justice, humanity, and nonviolent solutions? The latter case points to a different way of framing the Little Bighorn battle. Rather than insist that cultural differences between Northern Plains groups and Euro-Americans made violent conflict inevitable, the NPS could address the historical causes of violence and suggest that finding nonviolent solutions to conflict is the work—peace through unity or, better, unity through peace—that might bring all Americans, indeed all humans, together. *Clash of cultures* suggests that human differences are problematic when in fact such diversity may be the key to unlocking human potential for good.⁹⁶

Instead of “A Clash of Cultures,” the monument brochures might read “The Little Bighorn: Confronting Violence.” There is a long tradition of memorializing battlefields as places of courage, honor, and sacrifice. But if at least one side always loses in war, if noncombatants are killed, lives uprooted, material resources wasted, and societies destroyed, why not also include folly? Undoubtedly, this approach would bring complaints from those who benefit from institutional violence and from those resigned to the “inevitability” of violence.⁹⁷ Such critics would argue that nonviolent strategies are naive and idealistic, that humans are innately violent, that warfare is often necessary; all are typical arguments, and all have been carefully addressed and challenged by an immense and growing body of violence and nonviolence literature.⁹⁸ Despite such potential resistance, US citizens might consider calling for historical parks and monuments that not only commemorate a complex past but point to a hopeful future. (Isn’t this what the congressional name-change legislation and the NPS dedication theme do? Shouldn’t citizens challenge federal officials to live up to the idealism of their rhetoric?) Perhaps, then, when visitors leave the Little Bighorn, rather than resigning themselves to inevitability, they will be thinking more like the Nez Perce woman who, in a video presentation at Big Hole, says that both sides suffered in that battle and “we can’t let it happen again.”

NOTES

1. By brochures, I mean the annual (Little Bighorn Battlefield, reprint 2002, GPO: 2002-491-282/40176) and seasonal (Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Summer 2002, Western Parks and Monuments Associations in cooperation with the NPS) publications visitors receive as they enter the monument. They are cited subsequently as LBB and LBBNM, respectively. Park rangers give interpretive talks daily throughout the summer. This essay is based in part on observations by the author during visits to the monument in August 2001 and July 2002.

2. The attendance figure comes from the National Park Service website, [<http://www.nps.gov/libi/pphtml/facts.html>] viewed 1 January 2004. The museum at Fort Phil Kearny State Historic Site in Wyoming, ninety miles south of the Little Bighorn battlefield, shows a short video entitled *Clash of Cultures*. The NPS used “Clash

of Cultures” as the title of its project “assessing national significance of trails associated with U.S. Army/American Indian campaigns in the trans-Mississippi West.” According to the website, Fort Carolina National Memorial, which focuses on the French attempt to colonize Timucuas in Florida in the 1560s, and Sitka National Park in the Alaskan panhandle, “established to commemorate the 1804 Battle of Sitka” between Tlingits on one side and Russians and Aleuts on the other, are both examples of a *clash of cultures*. The Big Hole Battlefield visitor brochure (reprint, 1999, GPO: 2003-496-196/40400) asserts, “The Nez Perce War was a result of cultural conflicts.” College textbooks have adopted similar language, such as “collision of cultures.” Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey (Volume I: to 1877)*, 11th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 18.

3. Public Law 102-201, 10 December 1991.

4. LBB brochure.

5. For examples of this familiar language, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 103–15.

6. As the old Nike commercial explained Michael Jordan’s basketball achievements, “It’s gotta be the shoes.”

7. Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History* 65 (September 1978): 319–43; Royal Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 57–71; James Walker, *Lakota Society* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Dan Flores, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850,” *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 465–85; Loretta Fowler, *The Arapaho* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989); George Dorsey and Alfred Kroeber, *Traditions of the Arapaho* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Virginia Trenholm, *The Arapahoes, Our People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970); John Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation: A Social and Demographic History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); John Moore, *The Cheyenne* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

8. Robert Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indians, 1866–1890* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 22–23; John Carroll, ed., *They Rode with Custer: A Biographical Directory of the Men That Rode with General George A. Custer* (Mattituck, NY: J. M. Carroll, 1987).

9. John Ewers, “Intertribal Warfare as the Precursor of Indian-White Warfare on the Northern Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 6 (October 1975): 406–10; Frederick Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805–1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86–109; Joseph Medicine Crow, *From the Heart of the Crow Country: The Crow Indians’ Own Story* (New York: Orion, 1992), 46–47; O. G. Libby, ed., *The Arikara Narrative of the Campaign against the Hostile Dakotas, June 1876* (New York: Sol Lewis, 1973); Colin Calloway, “Army Allies or Tribal Survival?: The ‘Other Indians’ in the 1876 Campaign,” in *Legacy: New Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, ed. Charles Rankin (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 1996), 63–81; White, “The Winning of the West,” 328, 332.

10. Anthony Wallace, *The Long Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Ronald Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975).

11. Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783–1812* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 173.

12. For the problem of defining culture, see Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, “Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions,” *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology* 47, 1 (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, Harvard University, 1952); Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz, *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 14–29.

13. Raymond DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 180–95; Richard Hardorff, ed., *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight: New Sources of Indian-Military History* (Spokane, WA: Arthur Clark, 1991).

14. Jerome Green, ed., *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); John Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 106, 162–63, 168–73; Paul Robertson, *The Power of the Land: Identity, Ethnicity, and Class among the Oglala Lakota* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13–21; Catherine Price, *The Oglala People, 1841–1879: A Political History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 133–54; Gary Anderson, *Sitting Bull and the Paradox of Lakota Nationhood* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 3–31.

15. In August 1994 a three-day Little Bighorn Legacy Symposium, focusing on the most recent research and conclusions, was held in Billings, Montana. The work of contributing scholars is readily available in Rankin, *Legacy*.

16. White, “The Winning of the West,” 338–41; Dee Brown, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroads* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001 [1977]), 182–89, 203–308; Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 247–50; Paul Hutton, “‘Fort Desolation’: The Military Establishment, the Railroad, and Settlement on the Northern Plains,” *North Dakota History* 56 (Spring 1989): 21–30; Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 54–95; Ward Churchill and Glenn Morris, “Key Indian Laws and Cases,” in M. Annette Jaimes, ed., *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992): 14, 18; Ward Churchill, “The Earth Is Our Mother: Struggles for American Indian Land and Liberation in the Contemporary United States,” in Jaimes, *The State of Native America*, 141–43; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Norman Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968); David Chidester, *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 113–22; William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969); Robert Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskins: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 133–47; Paul Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 298–99; Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 11–34. Gray’s summary of the Grant administration’s motives for a war against Lakota villages is worth repeating: “At one strike the war would open up the vast unceded territory to white use, legally open the Black Hills, terminate the chronic red-white friction in both

areas, and remove all resistance to the coming advance of the Northern Pacific Railroad" (23). For a perfect example of the assumption of sovereignty based on military force, see Gen. Alfred Terry's 1874 letter to Gen. Phil Sheridan, quoted in Donald Jackson, *Custer's Gold: The United States Cavalry Expedition of 1874* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 23–24.

17. This summary relies heavily on the work of Edward Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 129–71; Linenthal, "From Shrine to Historic Site: The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument," in Rankin, *Legacy*, 307–19; Linenthal, "Washita Present," in Laurence Hart et al., eds., *Washita Symposium: Past, Present, and Future* (Cheyenne, OK: Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, 2001), 64–71.

18. I take the phrase *brave soldier* from Robert Utley, correspondence with author, 1 March 2003.

19. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 131–41, 151–52.

20. *Ibid.*, 141, 146, 154; John Doerner, chief historian, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, correspondence with author, 16 October 2003.

21. Linenthal, "Washita Present," 69; Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 146–50. Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 476–78, holds that a virtuous, heroic, martyred, and redemptive Custer is deeply embedded in American mythology.

22. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 141–46, 158–59. Linenthal calls this debate a "war for symbolic dominance at the Little Bighorn" (148). Linenthal, "Battle or Massacre," argues that US policy on the Plains was "cultural genocide," not "total extermination" (44), but Ward Churchill reminds us that cultural genocide is genocide all the same, and comparing it to absolute physical extermination does not soften it. Churchill, "Genocide: Toward a Functional Definition," in Ward Churchill, *Since Predator Came: Notes from the Struggle for American Indian Liberation* (Littleton, CO: Aigis Publications, 1995): 75–106.

23. Utley to author, 1 March 2003; Michael Donahue, correspondence with author, 21 February 2003; Robert Utley, "Remembering the Battlefield," in *Custer and His Times: Book Four*, ed. John Hart (La Grange, IL: Little Big Horn Associates, 2002), 335–40; Paul Hutton, "Little Bighorn Battlefield OAH Committee Site Visit, May 24–25, 1997" (on file with the Organization of American Historians [OAH], Bloomington, IN).

24. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 154–55.

25. Although the painting depicts Custer and company in the foreground and their Indian adversaries as distant figures, the cavalry troopers appear scattered, confused, and in the throes of agonizing death. A bewildered Custer is on his knees, one hand clutched to a bleeding wound; his end will be more pathetic and feeble than heroic and redemptive. By contrast, the Lakotas and Cheyennes on the slopes below seem confident and energized, a few already celebrating victory.

26. Doerner to author, 16 October 2003; Donahue to author, 21 February 2003. In response to a query about the origin of *clash of cultures* terminology at the Little Bighorn, historian and former park employee Robert Utley wrote, "Nobody officially decided this as the official theme. The term has become a badly overworked cliché. (It is the title, by the way, of a park handbook I wrote for Fort Bowie back in the 1970s.)" Also, "I wrote the official park handbook under contract early in the 1980s. I have not read it since, but I imagine this cliché appears in it too." Finally, "It reflects no single decision, but has cropped out of a series of planner[s] and writers over the years."

Utley to author, 1 March 2003.

27. Linenthal, "From Shrine to Historic Site," 313–14; Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 161.

28. Barbara (Booher) Sutteer and Gerard Baker did not respond to letters of inquiry from the author.

29. "After 120 Years, a New Battle at the Little Bighorn," *New York Times*, 23 June 1996, 20; Jomay Steen, "Baker Takes the Helm at Mount Rushmore," *Rapid City [SD] Journal*, 12 September 2004, [<http://www.rapidcityjournal.com/articles/2004/01/12/front/top/news01.txt>], viewed 11 October 2004; Linenthal, "From Shrine to Historic Site," 311.

30. David Melmer, "Custer Fanatics Claim Ethnic Conspiracy at Little Bighorn Site," *Indian Country Today*, 12 June 1997, A1; James Brooke, "Controversy over Memorial to Winners at Little Bighorn," *New York Times*, 24 August 1997, 18; Wayne Sarf, "Notes from a True Custer Buff," *Indian Country Today*, 7 April 1997, A5; Linenthal, "From Shrine to Historic Site," 311–16; Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 30–31.

31. Hutton, "Little Bighorn Battlefield OAH Committee Site Visit". The argument regarding an attack on noncombatants can be found in Richard Fox Jr., "West River History: The Indian Village on the Little Bighorn River, June 25–26, 1876," in Rankin, *Legacy*, 139–65.

32. Quoted in Chris Smith and Elizabeth Manning, "The Sacred and Profane Collide in the West," *High Country News*, 26 May 1997, [http://hcn.org/servlets.hcn.UR/may26/dir/Feature_The_sacred.html], viewed 1 October 2003.

33. Deborah Frazier, "Custer Fans Win Stand at Little Bighorn; Indian Director Ousted from U.S. Battlefield," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 January 1998, A17; Carrie McCleary, "Cheyennes Recognized at Battle Site," *Indian Country Today*, 21 June 1999, B1; Donahue to author, 21 February 2003; Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 150; Linenthal, "Washita Present," 69.

34. Martha Underwood, "Local Art Professor Uses Many Skills Near Site of Custer's Last Stand," *Killeen [TX] Daily Herald*, 26 September 2002, [http://www.kdhnews.com/arts_custer902.html] viewed 23 January 2003. Donahue is an art professor at Temple College in Temple, Texas. He has worked as a seasonal (summer) ranger at the Little Bighorn "since 1987 except for three summers in the early 1990s which [*sic*] I could not get hired as I was a non Indian." Donahue to author, 21 February 2003.

35. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 114–15, makes a similar point when he analyzes the use of "encounter" to describe the "Castilian invasion of the Bahamas" in the 1490s.

36. In comparison, the precise language of Alvin Josephy Jr., "Indian Policy and the Battle of the Little Bighorn," in Rankin, *Legacy*, 23–39, exposes the vagueness of the Little Bighorn brochures.

37. LBB brochure.

38. Joseph Brown, *Animals of the Soul: Sacred Animals of the Oglala Sioux* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 121–23.

39. Severt Young Bear and R. D. Theisz, *Standing in the Light: A Lakota Way of Seeing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 27–33; DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 163–64.

40. Paul Hutton, "Philip H. Sheridan," in *Soldiers West: Biographies from the Military Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 87–99; Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 48–52; Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskins*, 53–54, 60–61; Minnie Millbrook, "The West Breaks in General Custer," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36, 2 (Summer 1970): 113–48; Brian Dippie, "Custer: The Indian Fighter," in Hutton, *The Custer Reader*, 104–08; Robert Utley, "The Little Big Horn," in Hutton, *The Custer Reader*, 249.

41. LBB brochure.

42. Sheridan wrote, "In taking the offensive, I have to select that season when I can catch the fiends; and if a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack." Quoted in Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 185.

43. LBBNM brochure. For an introduction to the Washita controversy, particularly the question of "massacre or battle," see Hart et al., *Washita Symposium*.

44. LBBNM brochure.

45. For the construction of and meanings behind the "heroic fantasy," see Bruce Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974).

46. Quoted in Brian Maffly, "Revising Bighorn Heals Some Old Wounds, Opens Others," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 July 2002, [<http://www.sltrib.com/2002/jul/0/062002/utah/utah.htm>], viewed 28 December 2002.

47. Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 22–24; Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskins*, 37–50.

48. White, "It's Your Misfortune," 142–47; Brown, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow*, 182.

49. LBB and LBBNM brochures.

50. Walker, *Lakota Society*, 15–17; Young Bear, *Standing in the Light*, xxvii–xxviii, 27–28; White, "The Winning of the West," 319–43. The point here is not to question the importance of the Northern Plains and bison herds to nineteenth-century Lakota identity and survival but to reject the notion of Indians as static and unable or unwilling to adapt to a changing world.

51. Colin Calloway, "The Inter-tribal Balance of Power on the Great Plains, 1760–1850," *Journal of American Studies* 16 (April 1982): 25–48.

52. James Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 136–40, 270–81; Walker, *Lakota Society*, 26–27, 84–86; Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 56–57; DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 321–22, 389–90; Price, *The Oglala People*, 10–13; Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 72–94; Joseph Porter, "Crazy Horse, Lakota Leadership, and the Fort Laramie Treaty," in Rankin, *Legacy*, 43–48; Lazarus, *Black Hills*, 82.

53. LBBNM brochure.

54. Robert Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 14–21, 97–100; Anderson, *Sitting Bull*, 43–45.

55. Black Hawk quoted in White, "The Winning of the West," 341. Sioux spokesmen could be honest about their use of violence, whereas American conquerors typically employed linguistic and logic gymnastics to maintain a facade of Christian morality and American republicanism.

56. Medicine Crow, *From the Heart of the Crow Country*, 58–78.

57. One way to challenge romantic views of nineteenth-century Plains violence is to examine current examples of tribal livestock raiding and counterraidering that are not

yet obscured by historical distance. For example, Solomon Moore, "No Honor among Cattle Thieves in Africa," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 October 2003, A1. As the poet Robinson Jeffers reminds us, regarding past bloodshed, "Distance makes clean." Robinson Jeffers, "Skunks," in Jeffers, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 99.

58. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, ed., *The Great Sioux Nation: Sitting in Judgment on America: An Oral History of the Sioux Nation and Its Struggle for Sovereignty* (San Francisco: International Indian Treaty Council/Moon Books, 1977); Tim Giago, "Black Hills Settlement Remains an Open Book," *Indian Country Today*, 15 June 1995, A4; John Young, "United Nations Official Hears Black Hills Claims," *Indian Country Today*, 21 September 1994, B5; Rick Snedeker, "Forgetting 1868 Treaty Won't Make It Go Away," *Indian Country Today*, 18 January 1999, A5; DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 256–75; Walker, *Lakota Society*, 157–68; Young Bear, *Standing in the Light*, xxix–xxxi, 138–68; Mario Gonzalez and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *The Politics of Hallowed Ground: Wounded Knee and the Struggle for Indian Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 24–77; Don Doll, *Vision Quest: Men, Women and Sacred Sites of the Sioux Nation* (New York: Crown, 1994), 12–13, 29, 92; Lazarus, *Black Hills*, 385–427; Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse: The Story of Leonard Peltier and the FBI's War on the American Indian Movement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Jim Vander Wall, "A Warrior Caged: The Continuing Struggle of Leonard Peltier," in Jaimes, *The State of Native America*, 291–310; Robertson, *The Power of the Land*, 199–239.

59. Regarding Custer's attack on the Washita, Linenthal, "Battle or Massacre," in Hart, *Washita Symposium*, argued, "Righteousness and innocence are without question two of the building blocks of European-American identity, and the notion that European Americans could be guilty of massacres struck at the very heart of that" (49). In an interview with David Barsamian, Ward Churchill explained the hesitancy to discuss Indian claims to territory: "But they stop talking about property rights as soon as the subject of American Indians comes up, because they know fully well, perhaps not in a fully articulated, conscious form, but they know fully well that the basis for the very system of endeavor and enterprise and profitability to which they are committed and devoted accrues on the basis of theft of the resources of someone else. They are in possession of stolen property. They know it. They all know it. It's a dishonest endeavor from day one." "Historical and Current Perspectives: David Barsamian Interviews Ward Churchill," *Z Magazine* (December 1995), [<http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/dec95barsamian.html>], viewed 23 August 2004.

60. Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Lloyd Gardner, *American Foreign Policy, Present to Past: A Narrative with Readings and Documents* (New York: Free Press, 1974); William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995); Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (New York: Verso, 1991).

61. Paul Hutton, "From Little Bighorn to Little Big Man," in Hutton, *The Custer Reader*, 414–16. Richard Slotkin, "Signifying on the Little Bighorn," in Rankin, *Legacy*, suggests the debate over Custer is intense and enduring because "the Custer story has served a vital cultural and political function: to symbolize the cultural crisis of modernization, of America's transition from an agrarian republic to an industrial and imperial nation-state" (291).

62. An obvious recent example is Jerry Martin and Anne Neal, *Defending Civilization* (Washington, DC: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2001), which,

quoting ACTA “founding chairman” [*sic*] Lynne Cheney, implies that criticism of US foreign policy could undermine “the idea and ideals on which our nation has been built” (title page). In 1995 Smithsonian Institution plans for a fiftieth-anniversary *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum brought cries of outrage and threat of congressional investigation. Succumbing to political pressure, the Smithsonian omitted the controversial historical analysis and offered only a simple historical summary. Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Amnesia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 269–318. For an example of the outrage, see Charles Krauthammer, “History Hijacked,” *Time*, 13 February 1995, 90. Like *clash of cultures*, the phrases *political correctness* and *anti-Americanism* have no literal meaning, so their use must be constantly and thoroughly deconstructed, exposed, and resisted.

63. In a review of an earlier draft of this article, a military historian and Custer scholar suggested that challenges to triumphalist history at battlefield parks “are most likely doomed to be exercises in futility” and that “people who run historic attractions that inflame or drive away visitors tend to lose their jobs.” He continued, “Under the circumstances, insipidity may be the best course for the Little Bighorn Battlefield to steer. It is certainly the safest.” “Reader’s Report,” 2003, in possession of author.

64. Quoted in Maffly, “Revising Bighorn.”

65. “A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions.” Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 4–5.

66. Robert Elias, “A Culture of Violent Solutions,” in *The Web of Violence: From Interpersonal to Global*, eds. Jennifer Turpin and Lester Kurtz (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 117–47.

67. LBBNM brochure.

68. In the early 1990s the NPS even considered subcontracting the Little Bighorn interpretive program to a private company, which planned to develop a seventy-million-dollar “living history” theme park near the site. John Young, “Crows Pursue Little Bighorn Tourist Attraction,” *Indian Country Today*, 2 February 1995, A1; Carrie McCleary, “Battle of the Greasy Grass Continues after 120 Years,” *Indian Country Today*, 30 June 1998, A1.

69. Author’s notes.

70. A year earlier, Gibbon and Gen. Alfred Terry had reached the Little Bighorn the day after Custer’s demise. Their approach ended the siege of Reno and Benteen’s men.

71. Alvin Josephy Jr., *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); David Lavender, *Let Me Be Free: The Nez Perce Tragedy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Jerome Greene, *Nez Perce Summer, 1877: The U.S. Army and the Nee-Me-Poo Crisis* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2000).

72. The comparison is between LBB and Big Hole, reprint 1999, GPO: 2003-496-196/40400.

73. Big Hole National Battlefield, “Guide to the Trails at Big Hole National Battlefield,” Glacier National History Association, 1997, 19.

74. Author's notes. A sign over the Big Hole museum entrance reads, "Cultural Conflict—1877," but this feels more gratuitous than emphatic. A nearby plaque asserts, "The Park Service must ensure the American story is told faithfully, completely, and accurately. The story is often noble, but sometimes shameful and sad." The wording comes from National Park Service, "Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century," National Geographic Society, 2001, [<http://www.nps.gov/policy/report/html>], viewed 1 October 2003.

75. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*, 163–64.

76. Writing in 1991, Linenthal hoped that "the rhetoric and rituals of inclusion may yet lead to a critical, mature patriotism, one that is neither jealous nor exclusive. In intent and in execution, activities like the construction of the Indian monument can act as symbolic salve. One hopes that such acts signify the gradual acceptance of the patriotism of inclusion at the Little Bighorn." *Ibid.*

77. Steve Young, "Lack of Funding Delays Memorial to Indians Killed," *Argus Leader* [Sioux Falls, SD], 26 June 2001, [<http://www.argusleader.com/2001/bighorn/Tuesdayarticle3.shtml>], viewed 29 January 2003.

78. Quoted in Larry Fish, "Monument Completes Battlefield Story," *Spokesman Review* [Spokane], 25 June 2003, A1.

79. Paul Rayner, "Native Warriors Now Honored at Site of Major Victory," *Boisvevain Reader* [Manitoba], 22 November 2003, [<http://www.boisvevainrecorder.mb.ca/cutschall.html>], viewed 30 August 2004.

80. K. Marie Porterfield, "Memorial Design Stirs Controversy," *Indian Country Today*, 3 November 1997, C1; Ron Fire Crow and Russell Brooks, "Little Bighorn Memorial Offends Some Native Peoples," *Billings Gazette*, 21 November 1999, [http://www.billingsgazette.com/opinion/991121_opi03.html], viewed 30 August 2004; Brian Maffly, "Healing Wounds: Thousands Gather to Honor Indian Warriors," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 June 2003, [<http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Jun/06262003/Utah/70032.asp>], viewed 3 December 2003; Steve Miller, "Design Reviews Mixed," *Rapid City [SD] Journal*, 26 June 2003, [<http://rapidcityjournal.com/articles/2003/06/26/news/local/news02.html>], viewed 9 July 2004. An advisory committee of nine Native Americans and two non-Indians oversaw the design selection process, and they were not told the identity of the entrants in the design competition. John Cook, "A Bit of History on Little Bighorn Memorial," *Indian Country Today*, 1 December 1997, A5.

81. Quoted in Maffly, "Healing Wounds." For a different view of women, men, and warfare, see Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harper and Row, 1987).

82. Paul Richardson, "South Dakota Battlefield Monument Irks Elders of Oglala Lakota Nation," *Indian Country Today*, 20 July 1998; Todd Wilkinson, "At Custer's Last Stand, a First Stand for Indians," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 2003, [<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0624/p01s01-uscc.htm>], viewed 30 August 2004; Steve Miller, "Monument Sure to Stir Emotions," *Rapid City Journal [SD]*, 28 September 2003, [<http://www.rapidcityjournal.com/articles/2003/09/28/news/columns/miller.html>], viewed 7 September, 2004.

83. Quoted in Brian Maffly, "Indians Honored at the Little Bighorn," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 15 June 2003, [<http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Jun/06152003/Sunday/65778.asp>], viewed 8 December 2003.

84. Quoted in Miller, "Monument Sure to Stir Emotions."

85. Quoted in Fish, "Monument Completes Battlefield Story," A6.

86. Quoted in Underwood, "Local Art Professor."

87. "Calls for Peace at Little Bighorn Memorial Dedication," *The Circle: Archives* 22, 6, [<http://www.thecirlenews.org/archives/22-7news3.html>], viewed 29 January 2003. Chief Austin Two Moons (Northern Cheyenne) and Enos Poor Bear (Lakota) coined the theme in 1989. Chauncey Whitright, "Peace through Unity Needed for Battlefield Memorial," *Indian Country Today*, 7 September 1998, A5.

88. Quoted in Young, "Lack of Funding."

89. Public Law 102-201, 10 December 1991. Frederick Hoxie, "Little Bighorn Battlefield Site Visit, May 24–25, 1997" (on file with OAH), encouraged Little Bighorn personnel to clarify the park's interpretive stance, particularly regarding issues of "culture," but little has changed in that regard.

90. Quote in "Indian Memorial to Add to Little Bighorn," *National Parks Conservation Association Magazine*, May–June 2003, [http://www.npca.org/magazine/2003/may_june/news5.asp], viewed 11 October 2004.

91. Quoted in Wilkinson, "At Custer's Last Stand."

92. Slotkin, "Signifying on the Little Bighorn," asks, "Will we continue to base our national identity on a mythology of exclusion—or reimagine our myths as fables of inclusion? In passing on to new generations our national memory, or history, will we require everyone—black, white, brown, yellow, red—to see the Battle of the Little Bighorn as Custer's Last Stand? Or is there a perspective from which we can see that, in the Indian wars no less than in the Civil War, in every one of our battles we did indeed lose some fine Americans. That in the struggles that have shaped our society—Indian wars, labor wars, racial conflicts, the Winning of the West, the industrial and postindustrial revolutions—every American victory has also been an American defeat" (302).

93. This absorption should come as no surprise: The US military has a long history of using Native Americans as soldiers and as symbols of war-making prowess; along with Blackhawks the US military has Apache, Kiowa, Comanche, and Chinook helicopters.

94. The myth of a united American people is frequently couched in perceptions of foreign threats, which are far more dangerous than domestic divisions and inequalities and require a rigorous commitment to militarized defense. The fiction that follows—"national interest" or "national defense"—becomes justification for expansionism. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 8–11, 59–79, 359–76.

95. Quote is from Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton's speech at the dedication ceremony, quoted in Maffly, "Healing Wounds."

96. Michael Nagler, *Is There No Other Way? The Search for a Nonviolent Future* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 2001), 283–84.

97. See Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 286–91, for an example of the military aerospace industry impoverishing public history.

98. For a sampling of this literature, one might begin with David Barash, ed., *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Nagler, *Is There No Other Way?*; Turpin and Kurtz, *The Web of Violence, The Anthropology of Peace and Nonviolence*, eds. Leslie Sponsel and Thomas Gregor (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994); Walter Isard and Charles Anderton, eds.,

Economics of Arms Reduction and the Peace Process: Contributions from Peace Economics and Peace Science (New York: Elsevier, 1992). If anything is naive and idealistic, it is the belief that after five thousand years of evidence to the contrary, the use of violence can reduce violence.