

What happened at Custer's Last Stand?

The most famous Indian battle in American history was a final flourish to the Indian's hopelessly valiant war dance. The battle itself was simply the result of the actions of one vain, headstrong—probably deranged—soldier, George Armstrong Custer. The Indian victory at the Little Bighorn merely hastened the inevitable: the brutal end of Indian resistance and extinction for their singular way of life.

While the white men wearing blue and gray uniforms fought each other to the death, there were about 300,000 American Indians left in the West. They had been pushed and pressed inward from both coasts by the War of 1812, Manifest Destiny, the Mexican War, the California and Colorado gold rushes, and all the other reasons that whites had for stripping the Indians of their hunting lands. The "permanent Indian frontier" pledged by Andrew Jackson during the removals earlier in the century had long been breached by private and public enterprises, as had every treaty in the sad history of the Indians. When the Civil War ended, the politicians, prospectors, farmers, railroad builders, and cattlemen were ready to take up where they had left off when the war interrupted.

The most powerful and numerous of the surviving tribes were the Sioux, divided into several smaller groupings: the Santee Sioux of western Minnesota, who had tried to accept white ways; the Teton Sioux, those extraordinary horse warriors of the Great Plains, led by the Oglala chief Red Cloud; the Hunkpapas, who would produce Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse; and the Tetons' allies, the Cheyenne of Wyoming and Colorado. Farther south were other tribes: the Arapahos of Colorado; the Comanches of Texas; the Apaches, Navajos, and Pueblos of New Mexico.

For twenty-five years, from 1866 to 1891, the United States Army fought a continuous war against these Indian tribes at considerable cost in lives and money. The final thrust began when the Sioux balked at the opening of the Bozeman Trail, a route to the goldfields of California that passed through Indian territory in Montana. Under Red Cloud, the Sioux attacked, destroying the forts that the army was trying to build along the trail. A treaty in 1867 ended this phase of the fighting, but it would get worse. Herded onto small reservations overseen by the scandalously corrupt Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indians attempted to live under the white man's rules.

Gold again proved the undoing of any hope for peace. Trespassers on the Indian reservations in South Dakota's Black Hills, led by Custer himself, found gold, and there was soon a rush into the territory. The Indians were ordered off the land, but decided to go on the warpath instead. Joined by the Cheyennes, the Sioux concentrated their strength in the Bighorn River region of southern Montana. In the summer of 1876, setting out against specific orders to refrain from attacking, Custer led his 250 men in a direct frontal assault, ignoring warnings that from 2,000 to 4,000 Indians awaited his attack. Led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, the Indians destroyed Custer's force to the last soldier, allowing only a half-breed scout to escape from the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876.

Of course, it didn't read that way in the newspapers back East. In the midst of the nation's Centennial celebrations, an outraged nation read only of a massacre of brave soldiers by bloodthirsty Indians. The romanticized reports of "Custer's Last Stand" provoked a furious popular and political reaction, demanding total warfare on the Sioux. The army's response was

savage. The remnants of the Sioux tribe were hunted down or forced to flee into Canada. Sitting Bull was later arrested, but died of a bayonet wound suffered in captivity.

After the Sioux wars came the great mopping-up battles in the Northwest, against Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and in the Southwest, against Geronimo and his Apaches. Captured in 1886, the ferocious chieftain Geronimo was displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair, where he sold his picture postcard for a quarter.

American Voices

From the last words of Crazy Horse (1877):

We had buffalo for food, and their hides for clothing and for our teepees. We preferred hunting to a life of idleness on the reservation, where we were driven against our will. At times we did not get enough to eat, and we were not allowed to leave the reservation to hunt.

We preferred our own way of living. We were no expense to the government. All we wanted was peace and to be left alone. Soldiers were sent out in the winter, who destroyed our villages.

Then "Long Hair" [Custer] came in the same way. They say we massacred him, but he would have done the same thing to us had we not defended ourselves and fought to the last. Our first impulse was to escape with our squaws and papooses, but we were so hemmed in that we had to fight.

What happened at Wounded Knee?

The Little Bighorn proved a costly victory for the Indians, only hastening the inevitable. Their subsequent battles against federal troops were all disastrous, as one Indian leader after another was captured or killed. But in spite of the odds, some Indians refused to submit, leading to the last resistance movement of the nineteenth century and a notorious massacre that truly marked the end of the era of the Indian wars.

In 1888 a Paiute Indian named Wovoka spawned a religious movement called the Ghost Dance. Ghost Dancers believed that the world would soon end and that the Indians, including the dead of the past, would inherit the earth. Wovoka preached

harmony among Indians and rejection of all things white, especially alcohol. The religion took its name from a ritual in which the frenzied dancers would glimpse this future Indian paradise.

The religion quickly took hold and was widely adopted by Indians throughout the Plains, the Southwest, and the Far West. But it took on new importance when two Sioux medicine men claimed that "ghost shirts" worn by the dancers could stop white men's bullets, leading to a new militant fervor among some Indians.

Alarmed by the Ghost Dancers, the army attempted to arrest a number of Indian leaders, including the great chief Sitting Bull, who was then on a reservation. Like Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull was killed during the fight to capture him. Another chief named Big Foot, also sought by the army, was ill with pneumonia and wanted peace. But three days after Christmas Day in 1890, his band of some 350 women, children, and men was intercepted by an army patrol and taken to an encampment at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. As the Indians were surrendering their weapons to the soldiers, the gun of a deaf Indian named Black Coyote discharged. Whether it was an accident or deliberate is uncertain. But the soldiers immediately turned their guns and artillery pieces on the disarmed Indians. At least 150 Indians, and probably as many as 300, died in the barrage. Wounded Knee was the Indians' "last stand."

The following twenty years would be the nadir of American Indian history, as the total Indian population between 1890 and 1910 fell to fewer than 250,000. (It was not until 1917 that Indian births exceeded deaths for the first time in more than fifty years.) But nearly facing extinction, the American Indian proved resilient if nothing else. With agonizingly slow progress, Indians gradually gained legal rights. In 1924 all native-born United States Indians were granted American citizenship. The ruling was in large measure a reaction of gratitude to the large number of Indians who fought for America during World War I, yet paternalism, discrimination, and exploitation were still commonplace.

By the time of the Great Depression (see Chapter 6), the plight of the Indians on reservations was, in the words of one

government report, "deplorable." During Franklin Roosevelt's tenure, a cultural anthropologist named John Collier was appointed Commissioner of Indians and proposed sweeping reforms that would recognize the right of Indian tribes to remain distinct and autonomous, with rights beyond other Americans. This was the so-called New Deal for Indians but it was a short-lived period of reform, replaced by the subsequent policy of "termination" under which the government sought to end the special status of Indians. As late as 1954, some states still kept Indians from voting. Yet, by the time of the 1980 census, there were some 1.5 million American Indians (including Aleuts and Eskimos), among the fastest-growing minority groups in America. As a group, however, they remain among the poorest and most unemployed Americans.