

Unmasking the Custer Myths

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George Armstrong Custer, whose “last stand” has been depicted by more than 200 artists since it occurred during the summer of 1876, has been made into a prime symbol of this country’s “winning of the West” from American Indians.

Glamorized in scores of books, and depicted as a gallant cavalier by Errol Flynn in films such as *They Died With Their Boots On*, Custer might even be seen as the centerpiece of a whole genre of American imperial mythology.

So true is this that, as the summer of 1989 rolls round and several western states plan their centennial celebrations, memorializing “the General’s immortal contributions” to their creation is intended as a high priority. In view of this, it is high time everyone took a look at the reality of the man behind the Custer myth.

Never Really A General

First of all, “General” Custer was never really a general. During the Civil War he was made a brevet (honorary) major general of volunteers, but his regular army rank never rose higher than lieutenant colonel. Even in his honorary position there seems to have been little of substance to commend him: he graduated rock bottom in his West Point class, was notoriously insubordinate and a braggart, and was to repeat what other officers termed “the same stupid tactical mistakes” throughout his career.

On the other hand, he showed an unerring instinct for brown-nosing superiors such as General Phil Sheridan and an uncanny ability to butter up the press. He also demonstrated a flair for visiting sheer brutality upon his opponents (such as executing prisoners) and for squandering the lives of his troops in spectacular, if often meaningless, cavalry charges. His star rose as a result.

After the war, Custer was posted to Kansas, to try his hand at Indian fighting. In this he was so singularly inept that during the summer of 1866 the men of his famed 7th Cavalry deserted in the field and in droves. The good colonel seized upon this opportunity to vent his frustration at being unable to defeat the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers against whom he was pitted by ordering several of his own troops shot for desertion and then denying medical attention to those not killed outright.

With that, he himself promptly deserted, scurrying off to check up on his wife, whom he was concerned might be having an extramarital affair. When six of the soldiers he’d impressed to escort him on this junket fell behind, he simply rode off and left them to their fate at the hands of the Cheyennes.

For this performance, Custer was court-martialed and thrown out of the army. Only the direct intervention of Sheridan allowed Custer to return, and then only because the general had a job requiring Custer’s peculiar talents.

Hence, at dawn on November 27, 1868, the colonel was able to lead the 7th in a surprise attack of an Indian village on the Washita River belonging to Black Kettle, the same Cheyenne peace leader who had suffered the in famous Sand Creek Massacre four years before. Custer’s troops recreated the earlier event, slaughtering men, women, chil-

dren, even the ponies, and their fearless leader immediately dispatched couriers proclaiming a “great victory” over this group of noncombatants.

A problem arose, however, as the soldiers were finishing up their ghastly work. It was noticed that large numbers of Dog Soldiers and other warriors were gathering along nearby bluffs. Custer soon learned that Black Kettle’s had been merely the first of several large villages on the Washita, and there might well be as many Indian fighters in the area as he had troops.

His response was to turn tail and run with such haste that he abandoned Major Joel Elliot and a detachment of men; Elliot’s entire command was killed as a result, but Custer was able to utilize his press contacts to make his cowardice appear heroic.

The 7th Cavalry did little fighting over the next several years, being dispersed for a time across the Southeast. Custer spent the period socializing and offsetting his own military incompetence by assembling a group of German and Irish mercenaries, such as Captain Myles Keogh, to actually handle his troops.

A Hefty Dose of Nepotism

He also engaged in a hefty dose of nepotism, gathering as part of his staff his brother Tom and brother-in-law James Calhoun, and eventually hiring his youngest brother, Boston, as well. When the regiment was again sent west, this time to Dakota Territory, its main activity was devoted to violating the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty with the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho, as Custer led an 1874 expedition directly into the Black Hills, the sacred heartland of their territory.

In the process, he once again played the press to his advantage, penning lies under a pseudonym to the effect that he’d discovered gold in the Hills, moving himself once again to the center of national attention and setting off a gold rush which sparked the “Great Sioux War” of 1876.

This last proved to be the end of Custer. His megalomania having apparently taken over completely by this point, he seems to have believed that securing one more big “victory” over the Indians would launch him on a successful bid for the presidency. Thus, he deliberately disobeyed an order from his commander, General Alfred Terry, and set out with the 7th alone to attack a large village in the valley of the Little Big Horn River.

Expecting to repeat the Washita butchery of women and children, he was completely surprised when the 800-odd men in his command were confronted by an equal or slightly greater number of warriors. Cut off from their customary retreat when faced with a real foe, and completely panicked by the experience, the approximately 225 troopers who’d accompanied Custer on his personal portion of the 7th’s three-pronged assault on the village fell apart under fire. There is evidence that many, including Custer himself, committed suicide rather than fighting, and there were no survivors.

A Classically Pathological Bully Boy

As is obvious in even this brief sketch, factual examination reveals the real George Armstrong Custer to have been vastly different than the dashing figure portrayed in the literature, paintings and films of Americana.

Instead, he emerges as a cynical, manipulating individual, sadistic and often cowardly, rather unintelligent and ruthlessly committed to his own self interest, a classically pathological bully-boy, with all the unredeeming qualities this entails. Ironically, when the Western states commemorate themselves by celebrating his memory this summer they will be drawing a thoroughly fitting connection, albeit one not at all intended in their eulogizing.

For in the end, Custer’s real career and character are the most eloquently accurate emblems of the true history and nature of the United States itself.

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Sidebar

“Following the Custer battle, the paper money found on the soldiers was turned over to the youngsters, who made play tipis out of it.”

—R. and G. Laubin, *The Indian Tipi*

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