

The Last Stand¹

Reviewed by Major Bradford D. Bigler*

I. Introduction

At the Battle of the Little Bighorn (LBH), a Civil War legend named George Armstrong Custer met death at the hands of Sitting Bull's warriors. The bodies were scarcely cold before the presses went hot. Ever since, participants, poets, and historians alike have been writing, re-writing, analyzing, and romanticizing² what became of Custer and his 210³ U.S. cavalymen.

In *The Last Stand*, the critically acclaimed author Nathaniel Philbrick⁴ writes the most recent installment in the overcrowded genre of Custer lore.⁵ What distinguishes Philbrick's book from the pack is a unique perspective that combines three independent threads for an intriguing read. First, Philbrick promises to explore both Indian and Soldier perspectives on LBH;⁶ second, he applies an analytical model toward unraveling how the participants' "distinctive personalities"⁷ influenced key moments in the battle;⁸ and third, he uses his analysis of Custer's personality to explain

the controversial eyewitness account of Peter Thompson, a survivor of LBH.

The Last Stand offers two thought provoking veins for the military reader. First, Philbrick's focus on developing decisive conclusions about LBH based on the characters' personality traits raises the exciting possibility of new insight into how personality affects military leadership in battle. In the end, though Philbrick's sometimes pessimistic view of human motives strips away some of the impact of his conclusions, *The Last Stand* nevertheless provides much food for thought about the nexus between effective leadership and interpersonal relationships. Second, *The Last Stand* delivers some interesting parallels to the current War on Terror. LBH was a single battle in a protracted counter-insurgency the United States fought against the Plains Indians. As such, the LBH is a timeless tale with application to the current day.

II. Every Tale has Two Sides: Background on LBH

From the beginning, Philbrick delivers to the reader all the information necessary⁹ to understand the big picture. In the first four chapters, Philbrick practically breathes the historical figures of both Custer and Sitting Bull to life. Custer is a tactical genius of Civil War fame¹⁰ who has now inherited the arduous task of pursuing the Grant Administration's military policy toward the plains Indians.¹¹

Unfortunately, the year 1876 finds Custer barely hanging onto command of his regiment. Philbrick explains the mutual and hearty "lack of respect"¹² between Custer and Major Reno, his second in command. Captain Frederick Benteen—Custer's senior captain and the one ordered to his relief at LBH—harbored a grudge fueled by Custer's supposed abandonment of several soldiers at a battle nearly ten years before LBH.¹³

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Presently assigned as Brigade Judge Advocate, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Georgia.

¹ NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, *THE LAST STAND* (2010).

² Books have even been written about the proliferation of knowledge and theories in the area. See, e.g., MICHAEL A. ELLIOT, *CUSTEROLGY: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE INDIAN WARS AND GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER 2* (2007) (referring to the "arena of historical interpretation and commemoration as 'Custerology'").

³ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 311. The actual number of troopers slain is probably as unknowable as what actually happened at the Battle of Little Big Horn (LBH). See BRUCE A. ROSENBERG, *CUSTER AND THE EPIC OF DEFEAT 2* (1974) (setting the number at 212).

⁴ Nathaniel Philbrick's book, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (2006), was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in History. Nathaniel Philbrick, *About*, NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, <http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/about> (last visited Sept. 8, 2010). Many of his other books have also won prestigious national honors. *Id.* Most of Philbrick's previous works center around the sea and maritime history, particularly as it relates to New England. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Collected Works*, NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, <http://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/books/collected-works> (last visited Sept. 8, 2010).

⁵ Although numerous volumes address LBH, the recently published James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn—the Last Great Battle of the American West* (2008) competes most directly with *The Last Stand*.

⁶ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xxi. While some books tell both sides, most read more like textbooks. See, e.g., HERMAN J. VIOLA, *LITTLE BIGHORN REMEMBERED* (1999), and COLONEL W.A. GRAHAM, *THE CUSTER MYTH: A SOURCE BOOK OF CUSTERIANA* (1953).

⁷ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xxi.

⁸ Philbrick is not the first with this idea. See, e.g., CHARLES K. HOFLING, M.D., *CUSTER AND THE LITTLE BIG HORN: A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHICAL INQUIRY* (1981), for a specific look at how Custer's "personality may have affected his actions at [Little Big Horn]." *Id.* at x.

⁹ A brief word on research values: *The Last Stand* delivers over 130 pages of appendices, notes, and bibliography; however, perhaps to make reading more fluid, Philbrick omitted all end notes. For the casual reader, the approach is welcome; for the reviewer, less so.

¹⁰ General Sheridan gave Custer and his wife the desk upon which the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse was signed, with the note, "[P]ermit me to say . . . that there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring this desirable result than [Custer]." PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 48.

¹¹ *Id.* at 62–65.

¹² *Id.* at 155.

¹³ *Id.* at 12–13.

Perhaps most significant is Custer's congressional testimony against corruption in the Grant Administration, which nearly quashed his participation in the military campaign before it had even begun. Under a compromise brokered by General Sheridan, Custer returned to his unit, but under the command of General Terry,¹⁴ a fact that Custer apparently resented.¹⁵ The first few chapters build a strong case that Custer was out for redemption at LBH.¹⁶

In the second and fourth chapters, Philbrick then turns to Sitting Bull, the charismatic, brave, and uncompromising spiritual leader of the Lakota.¹⁷ His rise to chieftom began nearly twenty years earlier in a daring battlefield challenge of a rival Indian chieftain.¹⁸ By the summer of 1876, due to the convergence of an increasingly aggressive Administration policy toward non-agency Indians,¹⁹ an Army attack on a neighboring Indian village,²⁰ and a healthy buffalo population,²¹ Sitting Bull was leading a resurgent yet fragile coalition of his own Lakota and the nearby Cheyenne.²²

III. Interplay of Personality and Military Leadership

Philbrick's initial focus on the personalities and motives of the key leaders at LBH promises to raise new and interesting insights into military leadership at LBH. While his emphasis on personality excels in some areas—namely, in using Custer's personality to explain and synthesize Thompson's controversial account of Custer at LBH—in other areas, his bias toward sinister interpersonal motives distracts him from drawing more solid conclusions.

One frustrating moment comes early in the book. In the lead-up to the battle at LBH, Philbrick convincingly argues all the reasons why Terry and Custer were at odds over leadership of the regiment and the plan to attack. Up to this point, his analysis is almost a cautionary warning of what

can happen when a leader allows his own personal ambition to come ahead of the mission.

Philbrick then takes a wrong turn, declaring that Terry, rather than Custer, was “perhaps more than any other single person, responsible”²³ for the rout at LBH. Philbrick argues that Terry's orders were ambiguous, and Custer knew it.²⁴ Terry “had a talent for crafting documents that appeared to say one thing but were couched in language that could allow for an entirely different meaning,”²⁵ and wrote the order in an ambiguous fashion to “protect his reputation no matter what the outcome.”²⁶ Philbrick appears to conclude that Terry, knowing Custer was impatient to fight,²⁷ set a noose for Custer to hang himself on.

Philbrick's conclusion reads like a conspiracy theory. First, he relies on questionable and potentially unreliable sources²⁸ to reach his conclusion. More telling, Philbrick acknowledges that the plan Terry developed actually matched the ground truth of where the enemy forces were located.²⁹ Thus, Philbrick leaves the reader with an unanswered and problematic question: How does creating a tactically sound plan designed to result in a coordinated movement on the exact location of the Indians make Terry “responsible”³⁰ for Custer's defeat?

Philbrick's ensuing narrative provides little to support his hypothesis that Terry was to blame. Philbrick describes how Custer's reconnaissance of the Rosebud river valley became sidetracked when Custer decided to abandon the “blue line,”³¹ a decision which resulted in him being at LBH days before he should have been and effectively foreclosed any reliance on neighboring units during the battle.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 9.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 39, 43 (describing Custer's “skylarking” and generally irresponsible behavior during the early parts of the march).

¹⁶ Although many books contain the same underlying facts, see, e.g., Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* 103–05, 161–63 (1988), Philbrick draws them together in a way that illuminates Custer's predicament especially well.

¹⁷ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 54.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 28–30.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 65.

²⁰ *Id.* at 66.

²¹ *Id.* at 68.

²² *Id.* at 53–69 (describing the re-gathering of the Indian population under Sitting Bull's command after the attack on Wooden Leg's village during the winter, and Sitting Bull's performance and visions received while performing that year's Sun Dance).

²³ *Id.* at 103.

²⁴ *Id.* at 103. Philbrick provides Custer's frustrated and sullen demeanor after the officer call as evidence that Custer knew he was being trapped.

²⁵ *Id.* at 101.

²⁶ *Id.* at 102.

²⁷ See *id.* at 99 (describing the impact a “fresh Indian trail” would have on Custer) (quoting Gibbon's letter to Terry, in CYRUS T. BRADY, *INDIAN FIGHTS AND FIGHTERS* 223 (1971)). See also, *id.* at 98–99 (arguing the actual plan was to “turn[] his wild man loose” to attack at his discretion) (quoting Major Brisbin, in E.A. BRINNSTOOL, *TROOPERS WITH CUSTER: HISTORIC INCIDENTS OF THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN* 280 (1989)).

²⁸ Each survivor had a stake in the judgment of history: very different stories came from the Army officer testimony than did from the family and friends of Custer. PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 351–52.

²⁹ “Terry believed the Indians were somewhere to the southwest between the Rosebud and Bighorn rivers, probably in the vicinity of the Little Bighorn,” *id.* at 97, the exact location Custer found them.

³⁰ *Id.* at 103. Philbrick recognizes the most pressing tactical problem of the day was to ensure the Indians did not escape. *Id.* at 96. Philbrick baldly states that splitting into two columns was a poor plan, without ever really discussing why. *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 140–48 (describing the scouting expedition that discovered the Indian village at Little Big Horn, and Custer's subsequent decision to lead the Regiment off the blue line to attack the village).

Philbrick's narrative thus undermines his conclusion that Terry was to blame, and instead reinforces the conclusion that Custer's fateful decision to abandon the original plan led directly to the defeat at LBH.

After this misstep, Philbrick makes up for lost ground when he addresses Custer's apparent inaction at the height of battle. The story begins some hours earlier when Custer divided the regiment into three separate commands, assigning Major Reno to mount a charge from the south. The second detachment, under the command of Captain Benteen, was to reconnoiter the left flank and bring in the pack trains. Meanwhile, Custer would take the main body and maneuver up the eastern side of the Little Big Horn to flank the Indian village. Reno's unit was the first to make contact. However, upon realizing the potential size of the village, Reno aborted the charge and dismounted into a skirmish line.

While Reno's forces waited, Philbrick describes how Sitting Bull sent his adopted son out with a friend to see if "the army [was] coming to make peace."³² The overture met with disaster when a Soldier shot one of the boys through both legs, and eventually shot Sitting Bull's horse right from under him.³³ The Indians attacked and quickly overwhelmed Reno.³⁴ Reno ordered a hasty and disorganized retreat, which rapidly degenerated into "a desperate mob . . . [where] the Indians were free to hunt the men as if they were buffalo."³⁵ Reno's rout comes alive in remarkably vivid and gruesome detail.

After spending much of the book casting Custer as a brilliant and courageous-to-the-point-of-reckless tactician, Philbrick next takes on a vexing contradiction: while the Indians fought Reno's troops in the river valley, Custer and his troops apparently did nothing for "as long as forty-five minutes."³⁶ Hinting at Custer and Reno's mutual dislike, Philbrick discusses the possibility that Custer may have simply been waiting for the Indians to defeat Reno in an attempt to hog all the glory himself³⁷ before concluding that the "distressing number of [versions of what happened make it] impossible to verify [that] account."³⁸

At this critical juncture in the battle, Philbrick delivers on his promise to synthesize the controversial memoirs of

Peter Thompson through an interesting exposition of Custer's personality.³⁹ Thompson was a trooper assigned to Custer's unit, whose horse had given out during Custer's march up the eastern riverbank. Before eventually falling in with Reno's battalion, Thompson had traversed much of the battlefield between Reno and Custer, at one point claiming to have stumbled upon Custer alone at the river's edge, far forward of his unit's position, "just one half hour before the fight commenced."⁴⁰ Although most historians have dismissed Thompson's account, Philbrick draws on past examples of Custer's daring and risky exploits⁴¹ to suggest that Thompson may have witnessed Custer "perform[ing] much needed reconnaissance."⁴² Although impossible to know whether Philbrick is right, he does a solid job of reconciling Custer's absence from the battlefield with his reputation for courage in battle.

Philbrick's conclusion indirectly raises a lesson in military leadership: when in charge take charge. Instead, Custer allowed his own impatience and desire for excitement to get the better of him. If Custer had been where he needed to be—with his troops—instead of where he wanted to be—out conducting reconnaissance—LBH may have turned out much differently.

IV. *The Last Stand* in an "Era of Persistent Conflict"

Beyond its commentary on the interplay of military leadership at LBH, *The Last Stand* delivers surprisingly gritty insights that parallel many of the lessons the United States is learning in this new "era of persistent conflict."⁴³ Three of the more striking lessons loosely fit under the familiar axiom to "know yourself and know your enemy."⁴⁴

First, with regard to knowing one's own human terrain, *The Last Stand* reveals the toll of war to be as real then as it is today. Philbrick's concluding discussion of the physical and psychological effects of battle is both profound and apropos. In 1876, both sides brutalized and misused civilians and those hors de combat—sometimes out of pure frustration, and sometimes out of an effort to gain the upper

³² *Id.* at 176.

³³ *Id.* at 177.

³⁴ *Id.* at 166–205 (detailing the battle scene between Reno and the Indian warriors).

³⁵ *Id.* at 190.

³⁶ *Id.* at 206.

³⁷ Philbrick quotes Theodore Roosevelt's words after being addressed with this theory: "The human heart has strange and gruesome depths." *Id.* at 208.

³⁸ *Id.* at 210.

³⁹ *Id.* at 210–19.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 218. Although the bibliography includes three of Thompson's writings, he does not cite to which actual work he quoted. *Id.* at 443.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 217 (detailing how Custer was no stranger to "outrageously risking thing[s]").

⁴² *Id.* at 216. While others have made the same conclusion as to Custer's purpose, those conclusions were apparently driven primarily by tactical considerations and not a personality analysis. *See id.* at 388.

⁴³ *See, e.g.,* STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE, UNITED STATES ARMY RESOURCES, ERA OF PERSISTENT CONFLICT, available at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/global-war-on-terrorism> (providing a helpful collection of studies on current warfare lessons learned).

⁴⁴ SUN TZU, ON THE ART OF WAR 25 (Lionel Giles, transl. 2007).

hand.⁴⁵ Over a hundred years' later, after numerous developments in the laws of war,⁴⁶ the principles of humanity sometimes seem as much a mirage today as they were in Custer's day.⁴⁷ To the extent that the exigencies of war are often antithetical to the principles of humanity contained in the laws of war, leaders and judges alike should remain vigilant to combat signs of Soldier fatigue or frustration with the law of war.

The second lesson relates to the first. With the current Army emphasis on resiliency,⁴⁸ the leadership lessons in *The Last Stand* seem particularly timely. Philbrick details the unhealthy responses some of the leaders had to the horrors of war. Some consumed enormous amounts of alcohol and opium or were court-martialed.⁴⁹ Some eventually committed suicide.⁵⁰ As leaders, *The Last Stand* highlights in dramatic detail the leader's need to take care of herself before she can take care of her Soldiers.

The third point strikes right to the heart of knowing your enemy. Counterinsurgency doctrine (COIN) has recently rediscovered that with the population as the objective, "some of the best weapons . . . do not shoot."⁵¹ On this point, Philbrick's analysis of a crucial point in the battle—Sitting Bull's last-minute attempts to initiate peace talks with

Custer's regiment—practically shouts the importance of impressing on Soldiers the fundamental differences between COIN and conventional warfare. At LBH, the cavalry troopers responded to the peace talks with firepower. Had the cavalry troopers been listening for the call of peace rather than to the drums of war, LBH might have ended much differently.

Then as now, the United States is in a long war for the hearts and minds of a population. In some ways, the issues and insights in *The Last Stand* hold a mirror up for the modern day. In words popularized by Kenny Chesney, *The Last Stand* tells us that "the more things change, the more things stay the same."⁵²

V. Concluding Thoughts

The military reader should find Philbrick an invigorating and thought provoking read on many different levels. Written more like a novel than a history book, Philbrick's energetic writing style shines, particularly in the battle scenes. Philbrick accurately conveys the fog of battle by "burrowing into the mystery,"⁵³ skipping around the battlefield in frequent sideways flashes that explore all angles of the battle.

If you are looking to find out what ultimately became of Custer's unit on the eastern riverbank, you will be disappointed. Where the preceding pages of battle have all the dash and fancy of a cavalry charge, Philbrick's treatment of the final engagement feel more like a tactical withdrawal into a "necessarily speculative account of [what] ultimately led to Custer's Last Stand."⁵⁴ Although his storytelling ability remains intact, much of the vigor of the tale dissipates under the weight of the assumptions he makes to tell it.

In conclusion, if you are looking for an engaging read that offers surprising insight into the impacts personality and relationships have on leadership in battle, as well quite a few useful lessons and comparisons with modern-day campaigns, then *The Last Stand* is a must-read.

⁴⁵ One of Custer's favored tactics to subdue the Indian warriors was to capture the women and children. See PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1 at 259–60. Rape and use as human shields was also common. *Id.* at 137–39, 277. Philbrick describes atrocities committed by both sides: the desecration of Indian graves, *id.* at 84–85; scalping, *id.* at 199, and mutilation, *id.* at 200 (describing troopers severed penis shoved in own mouth), 228 (describing a stick thrust down a soldier's throat), 275 (discovering scorched heads in a fire pit and Tom Custer's skull mashed to the thickness of a hand), and 278–9 (describing Custer's ears pierced and arrow shoved into urethra).

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, Aug. 12 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3114; Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members at Sea, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3217; Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3316; and Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3516.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Gregg Zoroya, *U.S. Military Report: Taliban Uses Youths in Afghan Fight*, USA TODAY, September 12, 2010, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/Afghanistan/2010-09-12-child-soldiers-afghanistan_n.htm; Thomas E. Ricks, *In Haditha Killings, Details Came Slowly: Officerical Version at Odds with Evidence*, WASH. POST, June 4, 2006, available at <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/03/AR2006060300710.html>.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., UNITED STATES ARMY, HEALTH PROMOTION, RISK REDUCTION, SUICIDE PREVENTION: REPORT 2010, available at http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e1/HPRRSP/HP-RR-SPReport2010_v00.pdf; Gregg Zoroya, *Army Reports Record Number of Suicides for June*, USA TODAY, July 15, 2010, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-07-15-army-suicides_N.htm.

⁴⁹ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 301. Reno later went through two courts-martial for sexually related misconduct.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 286.

⁵¹ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY para. 1-153 (15 Dec. 2006).

⁵² CRAIG WISEMAN & STEVE MCEWAN, *Summertime, on THE ROAD AND THE RADIO* (BNA Records 2005).

⁵³ PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at xxii.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 258.