Battle of Little Bighorn (1876)

Below is a textbook account of the Battle of Little Big Horn in which more than 200 men from the 7th Calvary under George Armstrong Custer were killed in present day Montana. Read the excerpt carefully and consider the questions below.

What information does this account include? What do you think is missing?

TEXTBOOK ACCOUNT

In June of 1876, under orders to force the Native Americans onto a reservation, Colonel George Armstrong Custer entered the Little Bighorn Valley in Montana Territory. Although outnumbered, he attacked a large band of Sioux and Cheyennes. Custer and all his men died at the Battle of Little Bighorn. But the victory of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse was fleeting. One Sioux recalled, “a winter or so later, more soldiers came to round us up on reservations. There were too many of them to fight now.”

America: History of our Nation 2009, p. 586

More of the Story

Based on the textbook account above, do you think all of the U.S. calvary soldiers who fought that day were killed? The textbook author leaves out some important details about the event that were even known in the days immediately following the battle. Read the two documents below, General Terry’s official report of the battle (Document A), and the New York Times account of the battle (Document B), and identify what you think the textbook is missing. A diagram of the battle drawn from Nathaniel Philbricks’ historical account title The Last Stand will also help. Once you have read both documents and carefully, answer the historiographical analysis questions on page 4.

For each of the documents, including the textbook account above, ask the following questions:

Source:
What kind of evidence is it (speech, newspaper account, historical account)?
Who is the author?
What was the purpose of creating the source?
Who was the intended audience of the source?

The event:
What happened? Who was involved?
What were the sequence of events and any causes or effects/reactions?

Evidence:
What evidence is given in the account? What are the limitations of the evidence?
The following is General Terry's report, received late at night, dated June 27 [1876]:

"It is my painful duty to report that day before yesterday, the 25th instant, a great disaster overtook General Custer and the troops under his command. At 12 o'clock of the 22nd instant he started with his whole regiment and a strong detachment of scouts and guides from the mouth of the Rosebud; proceeding up that river about twenty miles he struck a very heavy Indian trail, which had previously been discovered, and pursuing it, found that it led, as it was supposed that it would lead, to the Little Big Horn River. Here he found a village of almost unlimited extent, and at once attacked it with that portion of his command which was immediately at hand. Major Reno, with three companies, A, G, and M, of the regiment, was sent into the valley of the stream at the point where the trail struck it.

General Custer, with five companies, C, E, F, I, and L, attempted to enter about three miles lower down. Reno, forded the river, charged down its left bank, and fought on foot until finally completely overwhelmed by numbers he was compelled to mount and recross the river and seek a refuge on the high bluffs which overlook its right bank. Just as he recrossed, Captain Benteen, who, with three companies, D, H, and K, was some two (2) miles to the left of Reno when the action commenced, but who had been ordered by General Custer to return, came to the river, and rightly concluding that it was useless for his force to attempt to renew the fight in the valley, he joined Reno on the bluffs. Captain McDougall with his company (B) was at first some distance in the rear with a train of pack mules. He also came up to Reno. Soon this united force was nearly surrounded by Indians, many of whom armed with rifles, occupied positions which commanded the ground held by the cavalry, ground from which there was no escape. Rifle-pits were dug, and the fight was maintained, though with heavy loss, from about half past 2 o'clock of the 25th till 6 o'clock of the 26th, when the Indians withdrew from the valley, taking with them their village. Of the movements of General Custer and the five companies under his immediate command, scarcely anything is known from those who witnessed them; for no officer or soldier who accompanied him has yet been found alive. ...

It is marked by the remains of his officers and men and the bodies of his horses, some of them strewn along the path, others heaped where halts appeared to have been made. There is abundant evidence that a gallant resistance was offered by the troops, but they were beset on all sides by overpowering numbers. The officers known to be killed are General Custer; Captains Keogh, Yates, and Custer, and Lieutenants Cooke, Smith, McIntosh, Calhoun, Porter, Hodgson, Sturgis, and Reilly, of the cavalry. Lieutenant Crittenden, of the Twelfth Infantry, along with Acting Assistant Surgeon D. E. Wolf, Lieutenant Harrington of the Cavalry, and Assistant Surgeon Lord are missing. Captain Benteen and Lieutenant Varnum, of the cavalry are slightly wounded. Mr. B. Custer, a brother, and Mr. Reed, a nephew, of General Custer, were with him and were killed. No other officers than those whom I have named are among the killed, wounded, and missing.

It is impossible yet to obtain a reliable list of the enlisted men killed and wounded, but the number of killed, including officers, must reach two hundred and fifty. The number of wounded is fifty-one. The balance of report will be forwarded immediately."
Massacre of our troops.
Five companies killed by Indians.

July 6, 1876 New York Times

...Muggins Taylor, a scout for Gen. Gibbon, arrived here last night direct from Little Horn River, and reports that Gen. Custer found the Indian camp of 2,000 lodges on the Little Horn, and immediately attacked it. He charged the thickest portion of the camp with five companies. Nothing is known of the camp with five companies. Nothing is known of the operations of this detachment, except their course as traced by the dead.

Major Reno commanded the other seven companies, and attacked the lower portion of the camp. The Indians poured a murderous fire from all directions. Gen. Custer his two brothers, his nephew, and brother-in-law were all killed, and not one of his detachment escaped. Two hundred and seven men were buried in one place. The number of killed is estimated at 300, and the wounded at thirty-one.

The Indians surrounded Major Reno’s command and held them one day in the hills cut off from water, until Gibbon’s command came in sight, when they broke camp in the night and left. The Seventh fought like tigers, and were overcome by mere brute force.

Additional analysis questions for each account of the battle:

According to the article/report, who else besides Custer was involved in the battle?
Who attacked the native village first?
What happened during the battle?
Were there any survivors?
Historiographical Analysis

Once you have read both documents and carefully compared them to the textbook account above, answer the following questions.

1) What are the perspectives of the two documents (whose ideas do you think they represent)?

2) What possible motivations might the authors have?

3) What are the major differences in the two accounts?

4) What do you think are the causes for these different interpretations?

5) What types of evidence do you think each author had to work with (e.g., interviews, letters)?

6) What are the major differences between the two accounts of the battle in Documents A & B and the textbook account above?

7) What accounts for these differences?

8) Why do you think the textbook author chose to represent the events in this way?

9) What other evidence would you like to have? What questions remain about the Battle at Little Big Horn after reading these accounts?