

To Hell With Honor: Custer and the Little Bighorn

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“Custer’s Last Stand” is perhaps the most famous United States military defeat on American soil. The famed “Boy General” of the Civil War met his match on the banks of the Little Big Horn River in the untamed American West on June 25, 1876. Why Custer died has been debated almost from the moment his body was recovered by the tattered remnants of his fabled Seventh Cavalry. Did Custer die because he was a reckless glory-hound, as the Army and media portrayed? Or was it, as Sklenar convincingly contends, due to the severe failings of his junior officers?

Shortly before his death, Custer split his command into three groups of about 150 men each. Captain Benteen, an able but petulant officer, commanded one group. Major Reno, a drunken coward, commanded the other. Both hated Custer. By splitting his forces and relying on these two men to support his attack on a vast Indian village in some sort of coordinated effort, Custer unwittingly sowed the seeds of his demise. For Reno and most of his men ran from the fight. Benteen inexplicably chose to remain with a cumbersome mule team rather than to close ranks with Custer’s besieged command.

Low on ammunition and vastly outnumbered, Custer and all the men with him were killed, no doubt expecting help to arrive at any moment.

Ironically, it was Custer’s misplaced faith in his two senior officers, not his supposed foolhardiness, which led to the disastrous defeat and the death of Custer and nearly half his command.

Sklenar supports his fresh insight and detailed analysis of Custer’s final hours with hundreds of footnotes and references to scores of resources, including letters from survivors and testimony from the Army’s Court of Inquiry. The book’s rich details are remarkable, and Sklenar may have written the “last word” on “Custer’s Last Stand.”

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