

The Southern Response to Custer's Last Stand

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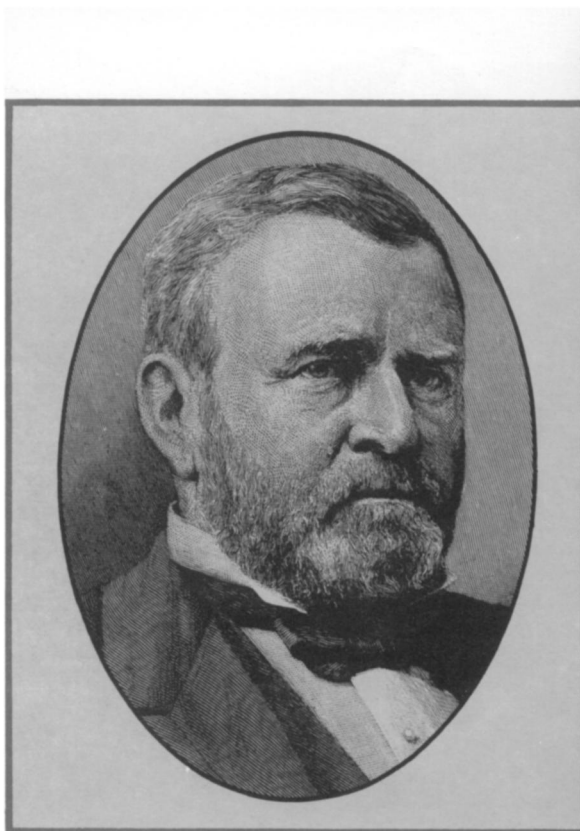
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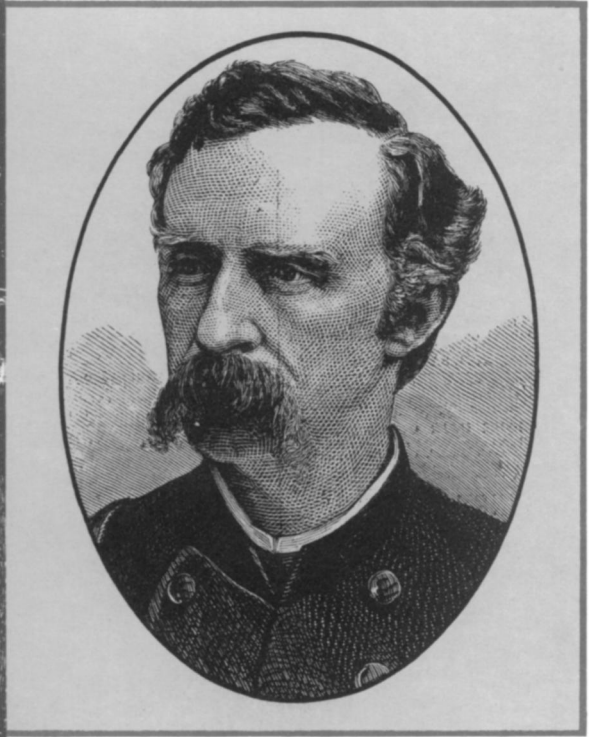


THE SOUTHERN RESPONSE

RECONCILIATION WAS TO BE the watchword of the United States in its Centennial year. Reconstruction was obviously in its twilight—only three Southern states remained “unredeemed”—and the patriotism aroused by the hundredth anniversary of American independence promised to alleviate sectional bitterness. But 1876 was also a presidential election year, and the dream of reconciliation fell victim to the actuality of partisan politics. The Democratic Party had emerged from limbo in 1874 to capture a majority in the House of Representatives. In 1876, for the first time in two decades, its prospects for winning the presidency were excellent in a country mired in depression and grown weary of federal mismanagement and scandal. Late in the afternoon of June 16, Rutherford B. Hayes won the Republican nomination in Cincinnati. Eleven days later in St. Louis, Samuel Jones Tilden received the Democratic nod. Thus, by the Fourth of July, 1876, the atmosphere was saturated with politics, and reconciliation had become one more gimmick in the politician’s bag of tricks.

The Dallas Daily Herald, in a July 7 editorial titled “The War of Good Feeling,” observed that the South, which for 15 years had “stood aloof, and declined to take part in the celebration of a day which seemed a mockery of her degradation and desolation,” had gone all out for the Centennial Fourth.

“This more than anything else,” the *Herald* averred, “shows that the return to a better feeling between the North and South has commenced, and that the spirit of harmony and fraternity which has long slept, is again awake in the hearts of the people. . . .”



TO CUSTER'S LAST STAND

by BRIAN W. DIPPIE

The same issue of the *Herald* printed the first telegraphic reports of the disaster which befell George Armstrong Custer and five companies of the Seventh Cavalry on the Little Big Horn River in Montana Territory on June 25—as well as an editorial which found the Grant administration “directly responsible for this massacre”: “If anything was necessary to convince the American people of the necessity for a change in the administration, this wholesale sacrifice of men upon the altar of administrative imbecility would.”

The Dallas editor's remarks were symptomatic of the partisan climate of the times, in which, as Robert M. Utley writes, Custer's Last Stand “instantly became a pawn on the political chessboard.”¹ A study of the Southern response to the disaster on the Little Big Horn is, then, an exercise in political, or, more precisely, Democratic, rhetoric and maneuvering. The event itself was irrelevant; all that mattered was the various uses to which it could be put. On the one hand, the Democratic Party's reform platform was negatively advanced by blaming the administration for the tragedy; on the other, the Republican platform, with its innuendo of continuing Southern white disloyalty to the Union, was positively countered by the South's willingness to defend the reputation of George Armstrong Custer, a fallen Northern general, and to avenge his death on the field of battle.

Aside from politics, the response to the Little Big Horn also provides an insight into the workings of the Southern mind in a significant year in its history, as it vacillated between sectionalism and nationalism.

¹ Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles, 1962), 39.

IN FOR IT was the caption for this Nast cartoon, published in the March 25, 1876, issue of *Harper's Weekly*. Underneath the title, embattled President U. S. Grant was facetiously quoted: "I hope I shall get to the bottom soon." Publications throughout the year carried cartoons such as this to point up the scandals which plagued the Administration.



THE SOUTH, IN ACCOUNTING for the Custer disaster, turned automatically to the Grant administration. As a Carrollton, Alabama, weekly put it, the responsibility should be placed "just where it belongs, upon the duplicity, corruption and incompetency of President Grant and the Republican party."²

This was in keeping with the Democratic position everywhere. The guidelines had been laid down in the National Democratic Platform, in which nearly half of the planks began with the word "reform." Custer's defeat was just one more vivid example of the need for such reform—preferably by means of a Democratic victory in November.

A Dallas paper made the connection explicit for its readers: "The blood of Custer [Custer was often to serve as an illustration of Sherman's definition of military fame: "to be killed on the field of battle and have our names spelled wrong in the newspapers"] and his noble three hundred men cry, 'Reform! Reform!'"³

Specifically, according to the *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, "the tragic events" on the Little Big Horn were "hardly more than the logical results of the scandalous mismanagement of the army by our military President and the infamous frauds, speculation and inefficiency which flourished in the Indian Bureau of the Interior Department. . . ." ⁴ Since they were to be the primary recipients of Democratic criticism after Custer's Last Stand, the Indian Bureau, the Army and President Grant deserve particular attention.

² "An Indian War," *The West Alabamian*, July 26, 1876.

³ *The Dallas Daily Herald*, July 8, 1876.

⁴ "The Indian Massacre," *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, July 7, 1876.

THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS, along with the Peace (or Quaker) Policy which it administered, were time-honored targets for anti-administration pens.⁵ Following the Custer battle, an intensified barrage was to be expected. Though the Bureau and the policy were not synonymous, they were often indiscriminately lumped together in the press.

Typical was a sweeping indictment in *The Atlanta Constitution*, which charged that the Indian "knows he has been robbed, swindled and made to bear unutterable sufferings through the Quaker idiocy and post-trader and contractor corruptions of the administration. Promises, treaties and laws have been broken in the interest of schemers against him."⁶

When a differentiation was made, the Bureau was invariably castigated for its venality, and the Peace Policy for its soft-hearted and muddle-headed approach to a problem which demanded realistic appraisal and action.

"Whenever a good system of general policy has been adopted," the *San Antonio Express* observed, without suggesting that the Peace Policy was an example, "there has been neither the wisdom nor the virtue in the Government and its agents necessary to its successful execution."⁷

Keying on the notion that the whole Grant administration was permeated with corruption, the

⁵ Grant's Indian policy, introduced in 1869, had two labels, often used interchangeably, though a distinction can be made: the Peace Policy referred to a program of "conquest by kindness," whereby the Indians were to be concentrated on large reservations and there instructed in the ways of civilization; the Quaker Policy referred particularly to the practice of having the different religious denominations nominate men to serve as Indian agents. The Sioux war of 1876 tended to discredit more the humanitarian overtones than the long-range aims of Grant's policy. See Robert M. Utley, "The Celebrated Peace Policy of General Grant," *North Dakota History*, XX (July, 1953), 121-42.

⁶ "The Indian War," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 7, 1876.

⁷ "Massacre of Custer and His Men—The Disasters of Our Indian Policy," *San Antonio Express*, July 8, 1876.



AN EXPERIMENT WORTH TRYING was printed under this Nast cartoon, appearing in the April 22, 1876, issue of *Harper's*. Moving the Indian Bureau from the Interior Department back to the War Department was a favored Democratic party stance in the nation's centennial year, a stance the party felt was greatly strengthened after the Custer Battle.

Democratic press condemned Indian management from its highest bureaucratic echelons on down to the agents and traders in the field. Often mentioned was the illegal disposition of Indian annuities. These were provided the agent by the government for free distribution among his charges, but had a habit of appearing in the post trader's stock, for sale across the counter to disgruntled Indians. Since agents and traders customarily received their positions through patronage, the link was quickly made.

"War with the Sioux," a Richmond paper contended, "is directly traceable to the Indian Bureau, and that Bureau is directly controlled by Mr. Grant and his personal friends."⁸

After the Custer fight, the Bureau's traditional corruptness came in for close scrutiny. In many quarters, its transfer back to the War Department (it had come under the newly-created Interior Department's jurisdiction in 1849) was urged as the only satisfactory plan. Before it could be purified, many argued, the Bureau would have to be purged.⁹

Equally volatile was the related issue of Indian armament. The frontier press waxed eloquent on the subject. An Austin, Texas, paper felt that the reason the government "did not furnish as good guns to the army as it did to the Indians" was "obvious": "It is much more profitable to sell the good

guns to the Indians and give the inferior ones to the army."¹⁰

In short, the corruption of the Grant administration's Indian Bureau was heedless even of the lives of the frontier's citizenry. "The whole Indian policy of the administration," Little Rock's *Daily Arkansas Gazette* fumed, "for years has been shaped in the interest of rings, who have been enriched through their traffic with the Indians, which has extended even to supplying them with arms of the most approved style."¹¹

IN CASTIGATING Grant's Peace Policy, "that infernal combination of ignorant sentimentalism, arch hypocrisy and rascally corruption,"¹² the Southern press often took pains to distinguish their remarks from an attack on the Indians themselves. Indeed, "conquest by kindness" might even be acceptable in principle, but it had obviously not worked out in (Republican) practice.

"The Indian policy of General Grant's Administration," a Charleston editorialist wrote, "has been simply to pamper the Indians with the left hand while robbing them with the right."¹³

This sentiment was common across the country, and many Republican papers joined in questioning the wisdom of persevering with the Peace Policy. The time had come, it seemed, to face the fact that the Indians would have to be whipped and confined to reservations before they would be amenable to the gentler persuasions of civilization. The *New Orleans Republican* was typical of many disaffected

⁸ *Richmond State*; reprinted in *The West Alabamian*, August 2, 1876 ("How the North Holds Grant Responsible for Custer's Defeat").

⁹ The transfer of the Indian Bureau from the Department of the Interior to the War Department had long been a pet Democratic project, and its advocates saw in the Little Big Horn an ideal opportunity to force the issue to a head. They had badly miscalculated the Congressional temper, however, and a bill to that end reintroduced in the House on August 3 failed. In the face of a major Indian war the transfer issue, instead of being reborn, was stillborn. For a general treatment of the subject see Donald J. D'Elia, "The Argument Over Civilian or Military Indian Control, 1865-1880," *The Historian*, XXIV (February, 1962), 207-25.

¹⁰ *The Daily State Gazette*, July 29, 1876.

¹¹ "The Indian Question," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, July 11, 1876.

¹² *Weekly Democratic Statesman* (Austin), July 13, 1876.

¹³ "The Indian Massacre," *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, July 7, 1876.

party organs. "The latest news calls for a different line of action," it editorialized. "The death of Custer and his men calls for speedy vengeance. It is a mistaken policy for good men to pray with the Indians while bad men sell them guns. . . ." ¹⁴

HAVING DISCREDITED the Peace Policy, several Southern papers proceeded to set themselves up as true friends of the Indian. Perhaps they sensed that the Republican Party's fumbling of the Indian question could be turned into a campaign issue of real magnitude, involving elements of racial prejudice that would offset charges of Southern brutality towards the Negro. (The latest Southern "outrage," the Hamburg Massacre, vied with the Custer Massacre for newspaper space throughout July, 1876, and the Democrats were anxious to play the story down.) Thus when Wendell Phillips assailed General Sherman for remarks which he interpreted to be an advocacy of Indian extermination, Southerners were intent observers.

A Charleston daily reprinted Phillips' letter in full,¹⁵ while the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, commenting that Phillips himself "was once, if he is not at present, one of the most prominent advocates of the extermination of the white people of the Southern states," made this editorial point: "The Indian question has only recently agitated this unhealthy gentleman's mind, and the condition of the red brother certainly merits his sympathy. Mr. Phillips should vote for Tilden . . . in order to secure the overthrow of the Indian ring . . ." ¹⁶

Here, then, was a chink in the armor of moral superiority which the North affected—a different racial question—and Wilmington, North Carolina's *Daily Journal* prodded at the vulnerability in a lengthy editorial, "Lo, the Poor Indian—How Is this Thus?" Can it be that the reason the Republican moralizers pay so little attention to the Indians, the *Journal* wondered, is "on account of their color, that they approximate too closely to the white and . . . that the talismanic key which will open all the floodgates of radical sympathy and radical affection must always be dyed in the wool? . . . The poor Indian happens not to be a negro, consequently he is neither a man nor a brother." The only logical reason for the Republicans' interest in

the Negro and indifference to the Indian was, simply, that "the one could be made a voter, the other could not." ¹⁷

HOW MUCH THE SOUTH itself cared about the Indian was another matter. What was important, as Austin's *Weekly Democratic Statesman* intimated, was that the South's dislike of the black man was matched by the North's dislike of the red man—and, moreover, that each area was justified in its attitude. "Are there not immutable laws defining the nature and as well the necessary modes of life and relations of different races?" it asked, and answered: "There are inexorable decrees of Providence defining as immutably the relations of whites and blacks as of red and white men. . . ."

Common race was to be the bond between North and South, with each section respecting the rights of the other to handle its "racial problem" in its own way. "One or the other race must be supreme," the *Statesman* concluded, "and while Grant declares he will sustain the black power, even with Federal bayonets, we would know whether the white race of the North, properly or at least necessarily exterminating red men in the West . . ., will finally, when the question must be solved, pronounce with Grant against the white race and in favor of the Africanization of the Gulf States?" ¹⁸ For the *Statesman*, at least, a concern for the Indian was limited to his political utility.

THE ARMY WAS ANOTHER focal point of attention in every discussion of responsibility for the Little Big Horn disaster. Here the Republicans had a strong upper hand, for the Democratic House on June 19 had passed an army appropriations bill reducing the peacetime establishment from 25,000 to 22,000 men. Too, the bill had allocated the army \$3,750,570.94 less than for the previous year, and had lowered the salary scale for officers of all ranks.¹⁹ Such an overt frontal assault on the army was bound to compromise the Democrats after the news of Custer's defeat reached the East on July 6. But that very day the Democratic defenses were laid.

¹⁴ "The Slaughter On the Plains," *New Orleans Republican*, July 7, 1876.

¹⁵ "The Indian Question," *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, July 22, 1876.

¹⁶ *Louisville Courier-Journal*; reprinted in the *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, July 25, 1876 ("Wendell Phillips and the Indian Question").

¹⁷ *The Daily Journal*, July 23, 1876.

¹⁸ "How the Races Jog Along with One Another," *Weekly Democratic Statesman*, August 31, 1876.

¹⁹ *Congressional Record*, 44 Con., 1 sess., 4743. Hereafter cited as *Cong. Record*.

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THE NEW ALLIANCE.

"We stand here for Retrenchment, and Reducing the Army of the United States."



Samuel S. "Sunset" Cox of New York, addressing the House on his ever-favorite topics of economy and reform, was interrupted by a Republican who wondered if he stood by remarks he had made at the Democratic convention to the effect that the Southern states needed "no Army until after November, and so far as the Indian wars were concerned, all we had to do was to turn the boys on our frontier loose and they would take care of the Indians."

Cox "clarified" this by saying that "we can very well afford until after the election to keep the Army from the throats of the Southern people," and insisted that the Custer battle provided "another illustration that the insane policy of expending large sums of money for the Army is not the true policy of Indian retrenchment."

"You say that we have not troops enough and that this House cuts them off," he went on. "Where are the 25,000, not yet diminished by our legislation . . . ? Three thousand of them and more are in the States of Mississippi and Louisiana, and in other Southern States. What are they doing there? There is no revolt there, no rebellion, no election yet."²⁰ And that, in a nutshell, was to be the South's position, volubly maintained throughout the Centennial summer of 1876 despite the figurative hands encircling her throat.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4428-30.

THE JULY 7 ISSUE OF THE *Charleston Journal of Commerce* noted on its front page that "already the disaster to Custer's command is being used as a potent argument against any reduction of the army;" then, on its editorial page, formulated a rebuttal: "The President cannot escape severe condemnation for suffering such a disaster to occur in the West while he is planning to control Southern elections by the bayonet."

This theme was reiterated everywhere in the South, with variations limited largely to the manner of presentation. Some took the factual approach, pointing out that there were only 3,200 soldiers in the theater of the Sioux war, while there were 3,500 men in Texas alone (though Texas, like most frontier states, wanted more, not less), and another 3,500 scattered throughout the other Southern states.²¹

A Brenham, Texas, weekly gave these particulars: "In a time of profound peace we have over one-half of the army stationed in the various Southern States, the largest numbers being in those States that are under Radical rule, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi coming in for the lion's share."²²

New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* preferred to agonize a little, constructing a defense of Democratic Congressional tactics that would not seem overly hostile to the military, since *The Picayune*, for one, felt that a full-scale war of extermination was in order, and that the army should be given support. "The duties required of it are onerous in the extreme, often dangerous, and sometimes for other reasons painful and disagreeable," an editorialist observed. Then, in one neat sentence that covered all angles, he toed the Southern line: "In the present embarrassed conditions of our finances . . . [the army] is, perhaps, as large as the country can well afford to have it; but certainly it is too small to spare a single man from the immediate scene of war."

If the point was too subtle, its elaboration was not: "It is, of course, uncertain what steps the Administration may see fit to take in this emergency. The general election is near at hand, and a large number of troops will be needed to overcome the Conservative majorities in the Southern States. Gen. Custer has been already sacrificed, and the Republican party would prefer to see the whole army

²¹ *Mobile Register*; reprinted in *The Daily Journal* (Wilmington), July 23, 1876 ("In a Nutshell").

²² "Troops in the South," *Brenham Banner*, September 1, 1876.

murdered in detachments to risking the results of a fair election.”²³

The Picayune's conclusion suggests a third approach, in which logic was subordinated to indignant rhetoric. Believing Custer and his men to have been sacrificed to “a miserable, niggardly, partisan policy,” the July 7 *Dallas Daily Herald* thundered: “If the troops now loafing and idling in the South, to influence the Presidential election in the interest of the Radical nominees, . . . had been where they belong, with Custar, [sic]” this massacre would not have “disgraced us in this Centennial year.”

Two days later *The Herald* devoted a full editorial to this theme, concluding with a stirring call to its readers to unite “in one solid, unbroken column” to annihilate the Indians and, one supposes, the Republicans, figuratively speaking: “Texans to the rescue! Remember Custar’s [sic] fate! Remember that the Republican administration gave him a less number of troops to fight the Indians . . . than to compel Louisiana and Mississippi to go for the infamous nominees of the Republican party!”²⁴

The Southern line, in short, was to emphasize that the army was of sufficient strength to defeat the Sioux if the troops were correctly distributed. Once again, therefore, Grant was responsible for Custer’s death. In his obsession with a Republican victory in November, he had neglected the army on the frontier in order that bayonets might preside over Southern ballot boxes. But Southern opinion in 1876 was hardly monolithic, and any general position was subject to variations. When, after much wrangling in committee, the Senate prevailed and an army appropriations bill was finally passed on July 19 with all of the House provisions relating to the “reduction, re-organization, and pay of the Army” struck down,²⁵ an audible sigh of relief escaped from *The Victoria* (Texas) *Advocate*.

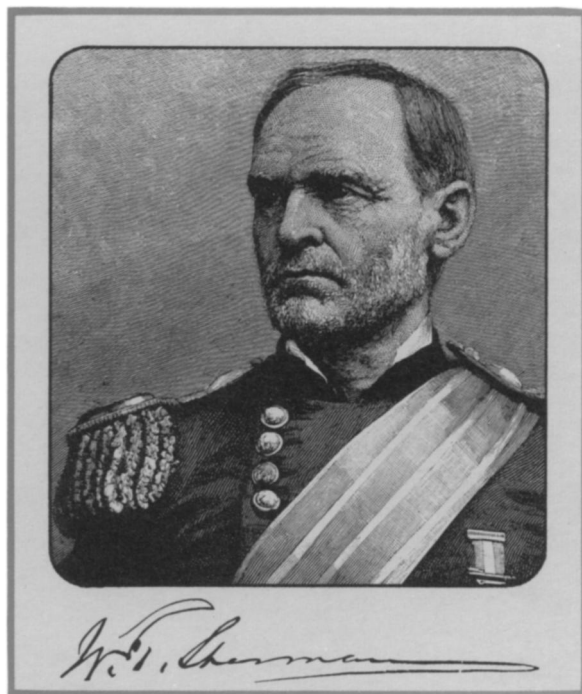
The *Advocate* had followed the standard Democratic line in denouncing the folly of stationing troops in the South while Custer was “butchered on the plains,” but it deviated enough later to admit that the House, in view of “the outbreak of the present Indian war,” was wise in withdrawing from “its position on the military appropriation bill.”²⁶

²³ “The Death of Custer,” *The Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1876.

²⁴ *The Dallas Daily Herald*, July 7, 1876 (“The Massacre of Custar’s [sic] Command”); July 9, 1876 (“Custar’s [sic] Murder”).

²⁵ *Cong. Record*, 4721.

²⁶ *The Victoria Advocate*, July 27, 1876 (“Practical Demonstration”); August 3, 1876.



Circumstances had changed, and the frontier’s needs now took precedence over party. *The Republican*, a weekly campaign tract published in San Antonio from July through October, 1876, noted in its first number another reason why Democratic efforts to reduce the army should be discouraged. Even then, San Antonio was fattening on the military pork barrel, and Democratic reformer-economizers might conceivably shut the supply off at its source.

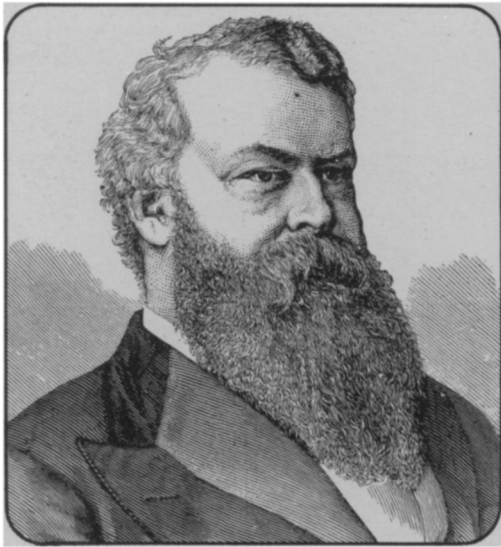
“We would have nothing to expect from a democratic administration but the annihilation of the army,” *The Republican* warned. “Our new military depot would become the play ground for rats, and desolation would mark the spot.”²⁷

It was an appeal attuned to the spirit of the New South—economic self-interest over Democratic purity—and it presaged, in its assumptions, “the apostasy of the South” which effected the compromise of 1877.

The Little Big Horn raised another military consideration. The disaster, it was argued, would never have occurred, even with an inadequate force on the frontier, had there not been incompetence in the highest echelons of command.

By coincidence, the nation’s top military men just happened to be Ulysses S. Grant, Commander-in-Chief; William Tecumseh Sherman, General of the Army, and Philip H. Sheridan, Lieutenant-General and commander of the Military Division of the

²⁷ *The Republican*, July 15, 1876.



WILLIAM W. BELKNAP

Missouri. It was a provocative trio of names, and many Southern editorialists echoed "Sunset" Cox's taunting words to his Republican colleagues: "You ask about the Army; why, a portion of it, its generals at least [Sherman and Sheridan are meant], are rollicking now at the Centennial in Philadelphia while Custer falls in the wilderness."²⁸

The attacks on Sherman and Sheridan, however, were just needle pricks compared to the broadsword blows which the South rained upon President Grant. If Robert E. Lee, steeped in doomed nobility, had become the symbol of the Lost Cause, then Grant, equated in the Southern mind with defeat, repression and humiliation, had become the symbol of Radical Reconstruction. Thus Southern papers, in attributing responsibility for Custer's Last Stand to Grant's administration and the Republican Party, often descended to the level of personal vilification.

The Atlanta Times, avowing that "somebody is to blame for these disasters," mentioned "Grant's post traders," who supplied the Sioux with arms and ammunition, and "the officer in command, or the Secretary of War" for the expedition's faulty strategy, before settling on the Chief Magistrate himself, "a mere soldier elevated by luck to a position beyond his capacity."²⁹

²⁸ *Cong. Record*, 4430. Cox was referring to the fact that both Sherman and Sheridan, among other generals, were attending the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia when the news of the Little Big Horn broke.

²⁹ *The Atlanta Times*, July 7, 1876; July 8, 1876 ("The Indian Campaign").

THE PARTICULAR DOOR which Custer's death opened to Grant's detractors had been set ajar earlier that year when Custer testified before a House committee investigating charges of malfeasance in the War Department, especially as they related to sales of post traderships.

Secretary of War W. W. Belknap, faced with impeachment proceedings, had resigned on March 2 when the scandal first broke, but the investigation and then his trial dragged on well into summer. The Democrats, with their eyes on the political main chance, introduced every possible witness who could cast aspersions upon the Administration's conduct, regardless of the legal validity of his testimony. Custer appeared before the committee on March 29 and April 4. His "hearsay" evidence, as he himself termed it,³⁰ snared not only Belknap, but also the President's brother, Orvil Grant—and thus, inevitably, Grant himself.

In his anger, President Grant first deprived Custer of command of the Dakota column, at that time outfitting at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, preparatory to taking the field against the Sioux; then, on May 3, prohibited him from participating in the expedition. The Democratic press immediately rallied around Custer, and set up a clamor which abated only when Grant relented and allowed him to accompany the Dakota column in a secondary capacity.

When Custer fell at the Little Big Horn, it was natural that a link would be made with the Belknap affair and his disgrace at the hands of the President. And so, with occasional reports of the Belknap proceedings providing a melancholy counterpoint (the trial was not decided until August 1, at which time Belknap was acquitted), Democratic journals everywhere unleashed their fury on the President. "Grant and Belknap are avenged," Augusta's *Weekly Chronicle & Sentinel* snapped, "and now the annoying witness has been effectually disposed of."³¹

In this climate of irrationality, fact was irrelevant, and Custer, who had begged Grant "to spare me the humiliation of seeing my regiment march to meet the enemy and I not share its dangers," was now pictured as having been sent West to his execution by a vengeful President.

"It was said at the time," a Montgomery paper remarked, "that he was put on the frontier as a punishment for his conduct in the Belknap matter.

³⁰ Custer to his wife Elizabeth, April 17, 1876, in Marguerite Merington, ed., *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of George A. Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* (New York, 1950), 290.

³¹ *Weekly Chronicle & Sentinel*, July 12, 1876.

If it was desired to kill him off, the object has been attained.”³²

“Grant exiled Custer [sic],” *The Dallas Daily Herald* maintained, “and doubtless is glad that fear[less] soldier and unpurchaseable patriot is dead.” Custer was simply “murdered in cold blood.”³³

“All the blood shed in the fight with the Indians in Montana is blood upon the skirts of the administration,” *The Atlanta Times* charged. “It will never bleach out. The ghosts of the brave Custer and of his comrades will, and ought to, haunt the precincts of the White House and fill with horror the dreams of him who is master there.”³⁴

The assumption underlying all this was that “had the command of the expedition been intrusted” to Custer, “very likely . . . disastrous defeat might have been turned to victory.”³⁵ Wilmington’s *Daily Journal* was more adamant: “A gallant chieftain who had hitherto met with no defeat was stripped of his command and sent into the field as a subordinate, to execute a part, to carry out a detail, when he should have matured the plan and directed the whole. The result is known.”³⁶

Whether or not “the result” would have been otherwise was quite irrelevant. Grant had done it again. In a fit of pique, he had disgraced the proud young general, knowing full well, a correspondent in *The Galveston Daily News* asserted, that Custer “would court in battle an honorable *suicide*.” “Grant gave the first stab, and knew when doing it that the Sioux would do the balance.”³⁷

AS IF IT WERE not enough to be referred to in the press throughout the land as a murderer, the President had to endure the protracted sarcasm directed at his son, Frederick Dent Grant. Fred, a lieutenant in the Fourth Cavalry (the papers always said the Seventh), had the misfortune of being promoted to first lieutenant at the time the news of the Little Big Horn broke. The Democratic press set up a howl, nowhere with more glee than in the South. Fred Grant’s unforgivable sin was, of course, that he had failed to die with Custer.

³² *Montgomery Advertiser*; reprinted in *The West Alabamian*, July 19, 1876 (“General Custer’s Death”).

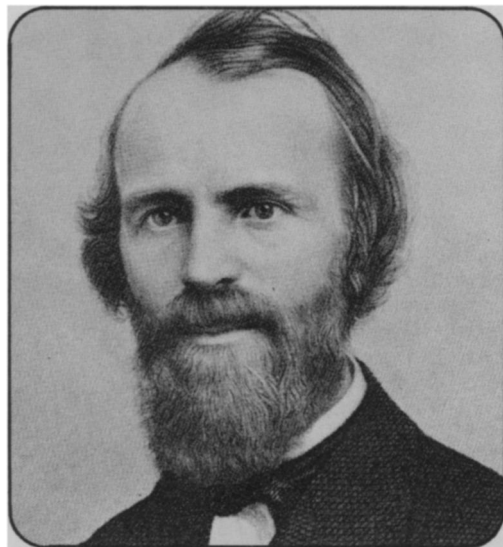
³³ *The Dallas Daily Herald*, July 7, 1876 (“The Massacre of Custer’s [sic] Command”); July 9, 1876 (“Custer’s [sic] Murder”).

³⁴ *The Atlanta Times*, July 9, 1876.

³⁵ “A Name Made Glorious,” *The Albany (Georgia) News*, July 20, 1876.

³⁶ “Custer,” *The Daily Journal*, July 11, 1876.

³⁷ “The Fall of Custer,” *The Galveston Daily News*, July 19, 1876.



SAMUEL S. COX

“Absenteeism seems to be epidemic in the Grant family of late,” a North Carolina paper commented. Fred was too busy playing with his baby to be fighting out West, “so that when Custer and the others got killed Fred only got promotion. . . . And such is soldiering when a man happens to be President Grant’s son!”³⁸

For awhile, Fred Grant appeared well on his way to becoming the anti-hero to Custer’s hero. “Lt. Fred Grant Safe,” *The Van Buren (Arkansas) Press* headlined its contribution;³⁹ an Austin paper urged him to “abandon his feather-bed, bomb proof position at the White House and ‘go West, young man, go West.’”⁴⁰ *The Constitution* took great joy in detailing young Grant’s progress in that direction, noting that he “got as far as Chicago, on his way to exterminate the Sioux . . .” He was sent there “as soon as the Sioux war became serious . . . to be near the scene of action and protect the headquarters of Sheridan’s department. His pa is no Brutus.” *The Constitution* had already entertained its readers with a succession of puns on Sitting Bull’s name, and it crowned its assault on Fred Grant with the suggestion that he be dubbed “Sitting Calf.”⁴¹

The constant harassment and personal abuse would have riled a more even-tempered man than

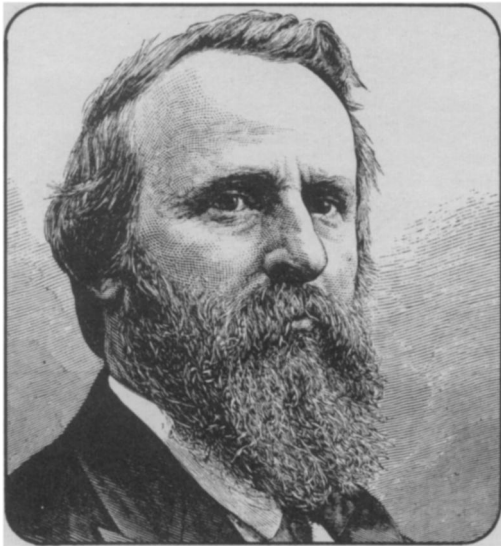
³⁸ *The Daily Journal*, July 13, 1876.

³⁹ *The Van Buren Press*, July 18, 1876.

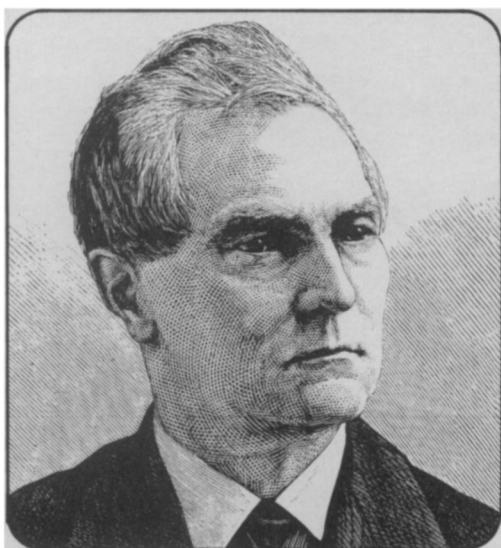
⁴⁰ *The Daily State Gazette*, July 29, 1876.

⁴¹ *The Constitution*, July 26 and July 30, 1876. Since Fred Grant was aide-de-camp to Sheridan, Chicago headquarters was his rightful place.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY TICKET, 1876



RUTHERFORD B. HAYES



WILLIAM A. WHEELER

Ulysses S. Grant. It is not surprising, then, that when he at last delivered his assessment of the responsibility for the Little Big Horn disaster, it was intemperate and ungenerous. "I regard Custer's massacre as a sacrifice of troops brought on by Custer himself," he told a *New York Herald* reporter in early September, adding that the tragedy was "wholly unnecessary—wholly unnecessary."⁴² Apparently the President had come to realize that praise of Custer equalled an implicit or explicit condemnation of himself and his administration. It was an equation which most Southerners had also mastered.

The more George Custer came under attack from the administration press, the more agreeable he became to Democrats everywhere. The South was no exception.

"It is noticeable," *The Daily Picayune* sanctimoniously launched an editorial entitled Custer's Critics, "that the Administration papers are taking particular pains to blacken the memory of the gallant Custer by charging him with unsoldierlike conduct in the battle of Little Big Horn River."⁴³

A Texas weekly coyly professed to find it "a little strange, that while Republican papers are filled with inuendo [sic] and sinister suggestions regarding Custer, the Democratic journals are the only presses that attempt to do justice to the dead hero."⁴⁴ The only thing "strange" about it was the bedfellows which politics traditionally make.

FOR SOUTHERNERS WISHING to combat Republican imputations of disloyalty, Custer, even with name incorrectly spelled, offered an ideal weapon. Brave, dashing and chivalrous, with a flair for the romantic, the Northern war hero had been greatly in sympathy with the South both before and after the Civil War. He was skeptical of Negro advancement, and an outspoken Democrat who more than once had been branded a Copperhead. Best of all, he was in Grant's manifest disfavor when he rode to his death. A more perfect tool for Democratic purposes could hardly have been fashioned, and Southern editorialists gave voice to their gratitude.

"To live in story is the fondest dream of the soldier," *The Albany News* affirmed. "A few years more or less of this life—what boots in comparison

⁴² *New York Herald*, September 2, 1876. Quoted in Utey, *Custer and the Great Controversy*, 44.

⁴³ *The Daily Picayune*, July 18, 1876.

⁴⁴ *Burnet Bulletin*, July 28, 1876.

with enduring fame? The name of Custer is now enrolled with those to be remembered.”⁴⁵

A Richmond paper outdid all others. “The North alone shall not mourn this gallant soldier,” it trumpeted. “He belongs to all the Saxon race; and when he carried his bold dragoons into the thickest of the last ambushade, where his sun of life forever set, we behold in him the true spirit of that living chivalry which cannot die, but shall live forever to illustrate the pride, the glory, and the grandeur of our imperishable race.”⁴⁶

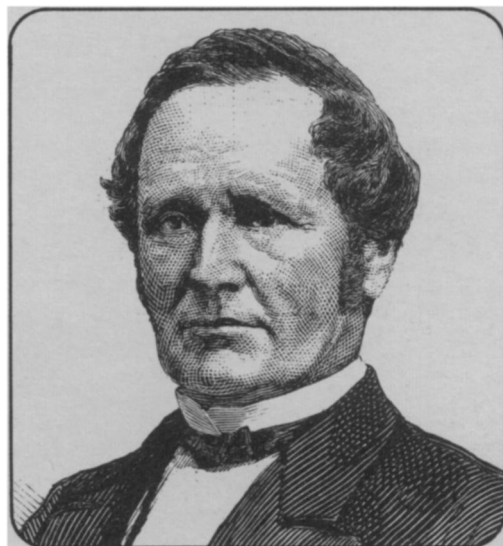
A NOTE OF UNCERTAINTY, however, sometimes crept into Southern accolades—a cautiousness which bespoke the unfamiliarity of the role. “A Veteran of the Army of the Tennessee” felt called upon to justify the “resolutions of regret and sympathy” for Custer’s death adopted at a reunion of Hood’s Brigade held in Bryan, Texas, on July 12. He thrice termed Custer “knightly,” and concluded: “The resolutions express the feelings of all true Southern soldiers, who to-day would gather about the bier of the knightly Custer and drop the tear of sympathy for the misfortunes of a former foe-man . . .”⁴⁷

“Custer was a gallant officer,” Charleston’s *News and Courier* ventured to say, “and, now that by-gones, are by-gones, we deplore, as Americans, the loss of the brave soldiers who rode to death with him, under the ‘old Flag’.”⁴⁸

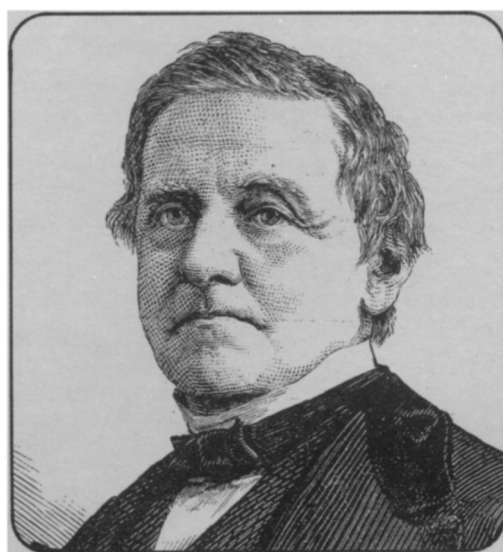
This tone of guarded praise was best captured in Wilmington’s *Daily Journal*. This paper discreetly waited several days, playing down the Little Big Horn news. When the drift of things became certain—the Democratic Party had taken Custer under its protective wing—it cranked out an editorial sprinkled with all of the prescribed epithets. But the strain inherent in this “just tribute” to a Yankee hero was evident.

“We care not now that the man won his first laurels fighting the armies of the South,” the editorialist remarked, then proceeded to show just how much he really did care: “We remember not now that for four years he warred against us in bloody battle. We remember no longer in bitterness for him, the bloody fields that come back to us strewn with the dead bodies of friends and kinsmen, dear

THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY TICKET, 1876



SAMUEL J. TILDEN



THOMAS A. HENDRICKS

⁴⁵ “A Name Made Glorious,” *The Albany News*, July 20, 1876.

⁴⁶ *Richmond Whig*; reprinted in *The Dallas Daily Herald*, July 16, 1876 (“Virginia’s Tribute to Custer”).

⁴⁷ “The Late Gen. Custer,” *The Galveston Daily News*, July 16, 1876.

⁴⁸ “The Defeat and Death of Custer,” *The News and Courier*, July 7, 1876.

comrades all, though many of them fell before Custer and his command; for in the contemplation of the sublime courage and superb heroism . . . every feeling disappears save one of reverent admiration.”⁴⁹ The praise which followed was more than tempered by this uneasy prologue.

YET THE OVERWHELMING sentiment in the South, ostensibly in keeping with the Centennial spirit of reconciliation and reunion, favored Custer. If it could be argued that words were cheap, the rebuttal was ready: throughout the former Confederacy men were volunteering for service against the Sioux. Each offer was carefully identified in the papers as another example of Southern patriotism, and as further proof of the falseness of Republican “bloody shirt” campaign oratory.

Under the heading “Avenging Custar [sic],” *The Constitution* on July 9 printed a telegram sent to the Secretary of War the day before volunteering “by unanimous vote” the services of Atlanta’s Cleburne Rifles “to avenge the death of Custer.”⁵⁰

“Noted ex-Confederate General” Joe O. Shelby’s telegraphic request to President Grant that he be allowed to raise a 1,000-man company in Missouri received wide coverage, and *The Fort Smith* (Arkansas) *Herald* observed that “thousands of rebel officers and rebel soldiers are ready to respond to any call for such a purpose.”⁵¹

Perhaps they were. Volunteer companies across the country were proffering their services, but the army had already decided to hold out for an increase in the enlistment of regulars instead. This, however, never dampened the enthusiasm of the volunteers.

A letter from Atlanta informed readers of the *New York Herald* that word of Custer’s death had fired “the old-time spirit of the south.” A gentleman had told the writer that he could immediately raise 2,000 men who would “fight as hard as they fought for the ‘stars and bars.’ They would win patents of loyalty in the lava beds, or they would stay there with Custer.”

“It is,” the correspondent felt, “very gratifying to witness the patriotism evinced at even this temporary disaster to our national flag.”⁵²

⁴⁹ “Custer,” *The Daily Journal*, July 11, 1876.

⁵⁰ “Avenging Custar [sic],” *The Constitution*, July 9, 1876.

⁵¹ *Western Independent* (Fort Smith, Arkansas), August 2, 1876; *The Fort Smith Herald*, July 15, 1876.

⁵² *New York Herald*; reprinted in *The Fort Smith Herald*, July 29, 1876 (“Southern Loyalty”).

In a similar vein was a letter addressed to Kentucky Representative Thomas L. Jones, dated July 9 at Louisville. “As this is the Centennial year of American Independence,” it began, “I desire to let the world see that we who were once soldiers of the ‘Lost Cause’ are not deficient in patriotism. Will you be kind enough to intimate to the President, that I offer him the services of a full regiment, composed exclusively of ex-Confederates, to avenge Custer’s death.”⁵³

In turn, Casey Young, Congressman from Tennessee, notified the Secretary of War that he had received telegrams from two units consisting of ex-Confederates, the Irish Volunteers and the Chickasaw Guards, as well as from the Jackson Guards and a Negro company, all “tendering their services in war against the hostile Sioux.”⁵⁴

TEXAS CAME THROUGH in characteristic style, her papers clamoring for the opportunity to turn the Sioux into “good” Indians. “Ten thousand Texans could be raised to go for the Indians who massacred Custar [sic],” one paper boasted. “Killing a mess of Indians is the only recreation our frontier rangers want.”⁵⁵

“Give Texas a fair show at the exultant Sioux,” *The Galveston Daily News* promised, “and there will be consternation and mourning in their wigwams before many moons have passed.”⁵⁶

“Give our Texas boys a chance,” an Austin daily echoed. “Texas deserves the honor of attempting to wipe out the Sioux, for she had a bloody fight with the Indian savage and has accomplished wonders in her own defence.”⁵⁷ Of specific proposals, however, there were none.

A number of concerns were involved in all of this volunteer activity. Certainly there was a genuine desire on the part of many Southerners to demonstrate their loyalty to the Union in the Centennial year, and offering to fight the Indians was an approved avenue towards reconciliation. Without compromising the South’s stance, or in any way endangering the sanctity of the Lost Cause, it presented an ideal outlet for patriotism. Indeed, it played off the Lost Cause tradition, which held that no other soldiers were equal to those who had fought for states’ rights. Obviously, a company of

⁵³ “The War in the West,” *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, July 17, 1876.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *The Dallas Daily Herald*, July 8, 1876.

⁵⁶ “If Trained Indian Fighters Are Called For,” *The Galveston Daily News*, July 8, 1876.

⁵⁷ *The Daily State Gazette*, July 14, 1876.

ex-Confederates would be more than a match for any Indians.

But perhaps a Charleston paper best summarized the complex of emotions which led so many Southerners to volunteer their services: "Judging from the impression made upon some old 'Rebels' in Charleston by the news of our defeat in the Indian country, it would take only the shortest sort of brush with any troublesome neighbor to arouse in the South the ardent patriotism that, in years gone by, sent the South to the front in Mexico. This is our country. We have the right to abuse it if we choose; but we make common cause against the common enemy, whether he be redskin or white."⁵⁸ The logic, if not unassailable, was understandable. It was an American's prerogative to criticize his country if he saw fit—and Southerners were preeminently Americans.

Again, there was another side to the matter, and again it was Wilmington's *Daily Journal* which presented it. While most Southern papers took advantage of the volunteer activity as an opportunity for self-congratulation, the *Journal* adopted a belligerent stance, suggesting that the colored troops—the "sable warriors" so enthusiastically endorsed by Northerners as being alone in all the South "true to the flag"—prove themselves by following "that flag to the Black Hills and stir[ring] up Sitting Bull."

"A number of white companies have volunteered," it petulantly remarked, "but then you know that's just like the white people of the South, always willing to help any one in any trouble even though they are slapped in the mouth all the time they are doing it, and though they get more kicks than coppers for their trouble."⁵⁹ For some Southerners, certainly, bygones were not yet bygones.

⁵⁸ "The Defeat and Death of Custer," *The News and Courier*, July 7, 1876.

⁵⁹ "The Colored Troops Fought Nobly," *The Daily Journal*, July 16, 1876. (See also "The Colored Troops," *The Atlanta Times*, July 15, 1876, and "Sitting Bull and Doc Adams," *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, July 13, 1876).

IN THE END, all the platitudes on the Glorious Fourth, patriotism and reconciliation in America's Centennial year finally could not conceal the fact that the South's viewpoint was a sectional one. National troubles were still read as Republican troubles—a weakness common to the Democracy, which often exhibited the irresponsibility of a party long out of power (just as the Republicans tended to the moral flabbiness of a party too long in power). A statesmanlike perspective would have to await victory at the polls. In the meantime, the South was not entirely uncomfortable in the role of observer-critic.

For one thing, it was a stance which permitted of emotional distance, and allowed readers of *The Albany News* to turn from an account of "TERRIBLE BUTCHERY! . . . Seventeen Officers and Three Hundred and Fifteen Men Cold in Death" to this short item: "What glorious prospects ahead for the people of the South—the best crop year since the war; out of debt almost, and Tilden to be our next President. Would not this be glory enough for one year?"⁶⁰

While scandals shook the American government in the East, and the Indians wiped out George Armstrong Custer in the West; while poets abhorred "this ruin and scathe" and searched "through the time's thick murk looking in vain for light, for hope," while the best minds of the generation deplored the falling away from national purpose which seemed to make a mockery of the Centenary of American Independence; down in the south, in 1876, it appeared to many that, if all was not yet right with the world, at least the year was at the spring and the day at the morn. Or, as a Texas commentator phrased it in an editorial on that state's rosy prospects, "brightly breaks the morning upon this land of promise."⁶¹

⁶⁰ *The Albany News*, July 13, 1876.

⁶¹ "How Brightly Breaks the Morning," *Tri-Weekly Herald* (Marshall), July 27, 1876.

ABOUT BRIAN W. DIPPPIE

The article published here results from Brian W. Dippie's long interest in the celebrated fight at the Little Big Horn, particularly with regard to its national impact during this country's Centennial in 1876. In part, too, it results from research for his doctoral dissertation, which dealt with American attitudes towards the Indian, and their practical consequences, from 1834 to 1934. The article was primarily researched in the extensive newspaper collections at the University of Texas, Austin, where the author received his doctorate in American Civilization last year. A native of Edmonton, Alberta, he completed undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta in 1965, and took his M.A. at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, the following year. Now Assistant Professor in American History at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Dr. Dippie has published in such journals as *Western American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, and *North Dakota History*.