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Whose Shrine Is It?

The Ideological Struggle for Custer Battlefield

by Robert M. Utley

In the summer of 1991, as the House of Representatives considered legislation to authorize an Indian memorial at the Custer Battlefield National Monument, friends sent me editorial cartoons carried by newspapers throughout the nation. Two in particular, typical of others, seemed to capture the essence of the controversy swirling around this legislation. They appeared within two days of each other in Richmond, Virginia, and Tacoma, Washington.

In the first, a family stands in front of a sign reading, "Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (formerly Custer Battlefield). On this spot on June 25, 1876, 3000 valiant Native American persons vanquished the racist U.S. Gen. George A. Custer and his 263 imperialist warmongering soldiers." The mother comments: "Swell . . . A politically correct national monument."

In the second, a beleaguered knot of white men are gathered around a monument reading "Custer Battlefield National Monument, where white men held out against renaming the place in behalf of Native Americans, who actually won." The label beneath: "Racists' Last Stand."

Each cartoon captures a small

This commentary is adapted from an address presented at the Montana History Conference in Helena on October 25, 1991. On November 25, on the eve of Congressional adjournment, the Senate passed the legislation Utley discusses, and it has been signed into law. Custer Battlefield National Monument is now Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

grain of truth but inflicts oversimplifications of monumental proportions and does grievous injustice to both sides of the dispute.

Those who championed changing the name were not necessarily indulging in a crusade for political correctness. There were good reasons to change the name.

Those who wanted to keep the historic name were not necessarily racist defenders of outmoded thinking. There were good reasons to keep the old name.

The contest over changing the name of the battlefield was simply the latest irruption in the ideological struggle for a sacred space. Note the title: not whose *historic site* is it? But whose *shrine* is it? The fight for the Little Bighorn Battlefield National

Monument was for a shrine, not a historic site.

A shrine is a place where people come to worship—or if not worship at least pay homage. A shrine is usually a symbol. It may objectify tangible people or events—Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial, a decisive battle of the Civil War at Gettysburg—but it also stands for larger abstractions, powerful currents of meaning that are vital parts of people's belief and faith. Shrines stir deep emotions in the faithful—religious, patriotic, or both.

Shrines do not necessarily stir the same emotions in everyone. They sometimes have radically different meanings for different people. When competing symbolism captures larger contemporary issues, a shrine may become a battleground in an ideological war.

It is timely, therefore, that a book has recently been published by the University of Illinois Press, titled *Sacred Ground: Americans and their Battlefields*, by Professor Edward T. Linenthal of the University of Wisconsin.

The Little Bighorn battlefield is but one of the battlefields Linenthal regards as sacred ground. Others are Lexington-Concord, Gettysburg, the Alamo, and Pearl Harbor, especially the



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USS Arizona Memorial. All have been ideological battlegrounds in a conflict between what Linenthal terms the nation's patriotic orthodoxy—the long-held and unquestioned convictions about the United States and what it stands for—and those who would challenge that orthodoxy.

It happened last December at Pearl Harbor during the fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese attack that initiated United States entry into World War II. A vocal group wished Japanese participants excluded altogether and blocked the display of a Japanese midget submarine, which sat out the year in the unlikely context of Fredericksburg, Texas.

And of course it is happening again at the Little Bighorn battlefield.

When I first went to work at what was then Custer battlefield in 1947 at the age of seventeen, I did not know what patriotic orthodoxy was. But we assuredly practiced it. Superintendent Edward S. Luce was an old Seventh Cavalryman, and the story we told was of brave soldiers who sacrificed their lives for their country and the opening of the West. The Indians were cardboard cutouts, impersonal foils for celebrating the heroism of Custer and his troopers. Such was the emphasis of the new museum we dedicated in 1952 with General Jonathan M. Wainwright, hero of Corregidor, standing by.

The seventy-fifth anniversary ceremony in 1951 extolled similar verities, with Admiral William D. Leahy and General Albert C. Wedemeyer as honored guests. Earlier anniversaries, especially the fiftieth in 1926, had followed this pattern.

Indians participated in all these events, but no one ever asked them how they felt about the speeches, and the version of history we were purveying, and none of them ever volunteered.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the National Park Service tried to introduce some balance into the interpretation, giving the Indians more emphasis in the museum displays and the talks of the guides. From my desk in

Washington as chief historian of the National Park Service, I watched some of this unfold.

In the early 1970s, with the onset of the Red Power movement, the Indians began to volunteer their thoughts with a vengeance. Upholders of the true faith—the orthodox patriots, to borrow Linenthal's phraseology—resisted with a vengeance. The Park Service was caught in the middle.

My baptism came in 1976, when I spoke at the centennial observance. Russell Means made the battlefield the scene of a well-publicized demonstration that disrupted the program. Ironically, my speech was a plea for remembering the battle on its own terms, in history, and resisting what I saw as the Means-style perversion of history in support of his own contemporary political and social agenda.

Then and ever since, as one confrontation after another centered on the battlefield, the defenders of the faith—those captivated by the martial glories of Custer and his troopers—have assailed the Park Service in biting terms for pandering to the strident demands of special interest groups. Of course they themselves make up a special interest group.

The latest battle in the war centered on legislation to change the name of the park to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and authorize an Indian memorial to complement the Seventh Cavalry memorial. Both issues reach back at least twenty years.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn involved two sets of antagonists, it is argued, but the monumentation commemorates only one, the losers. The Indians ought to have monumentation also.

Most battlefields are not named for a person, much less the defeated leader, and still less for one whose name carries such negative connotations for a sizable segment of our population today. The name should be changed, many believed.

Legislation to accomplish these twin purposes failed in the House of Representatives in 1990 when

Montana's two congressmen could not get together. In 1991 it passed both the House and Senate and was signed into law.

The field of the Little Bighorn arouses powerful emotions both in the orthodox patriots and in the Indians. For the patriots, however, the emotions are positive. For the Indians they are negative. Whether historically valid or not, Custer's name attached to the place and the monumentation there are deeply offensive to many people.

The name change has powered more controversy than the memorial. I waffled on this issue for twenty years. My experience shows that tampering with established nomenclature is invariably a futile enterprise. It always makes trouble, because someone always has a deep interest in keeping the old name.

In this instance the Custer name, like the landscape and the markers, is genuinely historic. It was part of the battlefield ever since it was set aside as a public property. To change it is to tamper with history itself, to override, so to speak, the action of an earlier generation. This is not to be done lightly, to appease a sentiment that may be only a fad, here today and gone tomorrow. Thus, albeit with ambivalence, I have always favored retention of the historic name.

With great misgivings, however, I switched sides and so testified in the House hearings on the legislation. I do not believe the symbolism the Indian community has assigned to Custer is historically valid. But the symbolism is reality, and Custer's name attached to the monument is genuinely obnoxious to nearly all Indians.

A parallel is the use of the Confederate flag, or parts of it, as a state flag or at sporting or other public events. This flag stands for much more in our history than slavery, and it is not something to be expurgated from our national memory. Yet it is repugnant to blacks. For this reason its uses today should be sharply examined and limited as necessary to remove the offense.

On a weather-laden day June 25, 1976, Hal Stearns (at podium), former Montana Historical Society Trustee, delivers the centennial address. Behind him on the dais are (left to right): Russell Means, Oglala Sioux; Tom Conroy, Montana state representative; Melvin Garreaux, Cheyenne River Sioux; Robert M. Utley, National Park Service; Ron Lytle, publisher, *Hardin Herald*; Richard T. Hart, Superintendent, Custer Battlefield; Frank Fools Crow, Oglala Sioux; Matthew King, Oglala Sioux; and Father Kopka, St. Dennis Parish.



Russell Means and other demonstrators (left) carry the U.S. flag upside down "as a symbol of the distress of the American Indian" during the centennial celebration at Custer Battlefield, June 25, 1976, while Frank Fools Crow and Hal Stearns (bottom left) lay a ceremonial wreath at the battlefield. Later (below right), Custer descendants George Armstrong Custer, IV, Dr. Lawrence Frost, and Col. George A. Custer, III, with Robert Utley lay a commemorative wreath at the monument atop Last Stand Hill.



All photographs by R. N. Wathen, Jr., and provided courtesy Hal Stearns

So with the Indians. The time has come to embrace the more neutral, and the more accepted usage in naming battlefields, of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

Only super-patriots oppose an Indian memorial, in the belief that it somehow dilutes the heroic image of Custer on the hilltop.

For me, rather, the issue is one of harmonious integration. What one sees now at the battlefield is a historic composition consisting of terrain rendered historic by momentous events and monumentation rendered historic by age, tradition, and the sentiment that prompted its creation. The integrity of this composition must not be harmed, either by misguided attempts to obliterate or alter, or by insensitive and intrusive insertion of competing monumentation.

Thus, all depends on the sensitivity and skill of the artist chosen to execute an Indian memorial. It must be a statement in its own right, commanding equality with the existing monument, yet not destructive of what is there now.

I was the token non-Indian on the committee assembled by the National Park Service several years ago to make recommendations on this issue. Russell Means was there, too, although I am sure he did not remember me as his competitor for the speaker's platform at the centennial in 1976. The committee adopted the principles stated here

and recommended them to the Park Service. The legislation enacted by the Congress reflects this approach.

But the principles could still be undermined in execution. As the controversy over the Vietnam memorial dramatized, artistic excellence comes in many guises. We can only hope that the panel that judges the competition contains true artists and preservationists of distinction, and that in its composition, deliberations, and decisions it is not overwhelmed by partisan politics or the patronage inclination of the White House and Interior Department.

Custer battlefield, or Little Bighorn battlefield, whichever, has been a vital part of my life for nearly half a century. For two decades or more I have been distressed by the partisan and antihistorical uses to which it has been put. But Linenthal's *Sacred Ground* has now given me a new perspective on this misuse. What I have seen as misuse, as a perversion of history, is in truth part of history, just as was the battle fought there. The Indian memorial erected there in the 1990s will capture a major theme of American history in the late twentieth century, just as the monument erected there in 1881 stood for an earlier theme.

The 1976 centennial was part of this latter-day history, as Linenthal recognizes. Of my speech he wrote: "Utley asked that the battle and the participants be viewed in

their own terms and not be used 'artificially to serve contemporary needs and ends, however laudable.'" Linenthal then points out: "Of course, for a century patriotic orthodoxy at the battlefield had done precisely that: It had helped shape a culturally constructed—hence an 'artificial'—interpretation of the battle. . . . Utley's caution about twisting history for political purposes certainly meant little to protestors who saw this as *their* opportunity to overturn symbolic domination by winning the symbolic battle of the Little Bighorn."

For the past twenty years, and for the indefinite future, this place where historic site and shrine come together has been, is, and will continue to be a battleground for a struggle between two patriotisms. I do not see the battle being won by either side in my lifetime. But I live with it more comfortably now, for I console myself that I am a historian watching the unfolding of history.

ROBERT M. UTLEY, an editorial board member of this magazine and former chief historian of the National Park Service, is author of numerous books and articles relating to the frontier military and the high plains Indian wars. Retired from the Park Service, he is a writer living in Dripping Springs, Texas, and is at work on a biography of the great Hunkpapa Sioux chief, Sitting Bull.

Markers, fence, and monument mark Last Stand Hill. Almost 300,000 people visited the battlefield in 1991.



R. N. Waihen, Jr., photographer, courtesy Hal Stearns