

# CUSTER AND THE PLAINS INDIANS: AN INTERPRETATION

## INTRODUCTION/CONCEPTUALIZATION

James Stevenson and John Derden  
Emanuel County Junior College

By focusing on the central episode of Custer's Last Stand, this fifty-five minute slide/sound production is designed to provoke class discussion concerning the United States conquest of the Plains Indians. Written by James Stevenson and produced by James Stevenson and John Derden, this presentation traces the military career of George Armstrong Custer and highlights certain features of the Plains Indian culture. When considered from the ironic perspective of Evan S. Connell's, *Son of the Morning Star* (1984) and Thomas B. Marquis' thought provoking, *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself* (1976), the Battle of the Little Big Horn becomes an almost pathetic culmination of 19th-century White-Indian relations. Such a view of the battle has not always dominated. It is, therefore, a credit to popular historians like Dee Brown (*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*) and film-makers like Arthur Penn ("*Little Big Man*") that the public perception of Native American Indians has changed. Still, the "noble savage" thesis can be carried too far, and Connell's witty insights provide just the antidote needed.

After deciding that Connell's outlook reflected something of our own style and sense of the ironic, we decided to use *Son of the Morning Star* as the basis for our slide/sound production. Additional sources, especially *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself*, supplemented Connell's account. These were balanced by a consideration of recent archeological findings at the Little Big Horn battle site ("The Custer Battlefield Archeological Survey of 1984," produced, written, and directed by Michael W. Parks). Together, the sources provided the information for the script. But, it was written to retain Connell's ironic edge. The script, we believe, keeps the audience's attention by judicious twists of humor.

### *Classroom Usage*

The slide production usually follows a fifty-minute background lecture on the "Old West." The class discussion generated by the slide show focuses on such issues as: imperialism, methods of warfare, cultural conflict, and changing historical perspectives on

Indians. Raised in a cinematic culture, students seem fascinated by the contrast between pre-1970 Western films and later motion pictures. The shifting image of United States Indians, as portrayed by Hollywood film makers and historians, always invites a discussion of justice and injustice, conquerors and the conquered, the present and the past. Students frequently sympathize with the fate of Native Americans, but they have little understanding of nineteenth-century White-Indian relations. This slide production on Custer and the Indians helps to correct many present as well as past views of the "Old West."

### *Research and Sources*

While extensive commentary on the Battle of the Little Big Horn exists, no definitive account of what happened to Custer and his men can ever be written. This does not mean that all histories of the events are equivalent or that all are mere speculation. But, it does indicate that historians and students are faced with the problem of discerning the plausible from the implausible. Research into the Battle of the Little Big Horn has turned up a number of unresolved questions. Some writers maintain that Custer's men were vastly outnumbered or out-gunned, while others argue that the odds favored the soldiers. And, almost all accounts have trouble sorting out the Indian view of the battle. Current archeological discoveries suggest that the Custer detachment put up a stiffer resistance than is depicted in our slide production. However, such discoveries are only tentative, and they do not vitiate our thesis that Custer's men died because they panicked.

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