DBQ: Custer “A Great Day To Die!”
By John A. Braithwaite

DIRECTIONS:
The following DBQ is based upon the accompanying documents and your knowledge of the time period involved. This question tests your ability to work with historical documents. Your answer should be derived mainly from the documents, however, you may refer to historical facts, materials, and developments NOT mentioned in the documents. You should assess the reliability of the documents as historical sources where relevant to your answer.

QUESTION FOR ANALYSIS:

Gen. George Armstrong Custer is reportedly to have said, on June 25\textsuperscript{th} 1876, “It is a great day to die!” What happened at the Battle of Little Bighorn on June 25\textsuperscript{th} and why did it happen? Was Custer a hero or villain? Why or why not?

PROMPT:

- Formulate a thesis statement
- Use documents as well as your own outside knowledge of the period.
- Deal evenly with all aspects of the questions
- Be sure to cover the time period given
- Assess the validity of the documents
- Draw effective and specific conclusions whenever possible

TEXTBOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Berkin, Carol  
Cherny & Berkin  
Gillon & Matson  
Boydston & McGerr  
Murrin, et.al  
Norton, et.al.  
Brinkley  
Bailey & Kennedy  
Boyer, et.al.  
Davidson, et.al.  

A Brilliant Solution  
The Making of a Nation  
The American Experiment  
Making A Nation  
Liberty, Equality, Power  
A People & A Nation  
American History  
The American Pageant  
Enduring Visions  
Nation of Nations
Map of the Little Big Horn, Courtesy of Dr. Fred R. Gowans (Brigham Young University.)
\begin{quote}
Source: Sitting Bull, 1875

"Behold, my brothers, the spring has come, the earth has received the embraces of the sun and we shall soon see the results of that love.

Yet, hear me, people, we have now to deal with another race-small and feeble when our fathers met them now great and overbearing. Strangely enough, they have a mind to till the soil and the love of possession is a disease to them. These people have made many rules which the rich may break but the poor may not. They take tithes from the poor and weak to support rich who rule. They claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own and fence their neighbors away; they deface her with their buildings and their refuse. That nation is like a spring freshet that overruns its banks and destroys all who are in its path.

We cannot dwell side by side. Only seven years ago, we made a treaty by which we were assured that the buffalo country should be left to us forever. Now they threaten to take away from us. My brothers, shall we submit or shall we say to them "First kill me before you take possession of my Fatherland."
\end{quote}
Document C:

Source: Letter from Lt. Richard E. Thompson to his family, June 1876

I am off, as you see from the heading of this, on the Big Horn expedition against the hostile Sioux. Already we have penetrated nearly to their stronghold, and in less than a week will be upon them, if they do not give us the slip. The command numbers 1,200 souls, including officers, troops, herders, and all employed, so that we are strong enough for any force that is likely to offer us battle. I am fortunate in having on the staff, commander (Gen. Terry). Gen. Custer is in command of his regiment, which forms part of the force, and you will probably soon hear of some engagement. As I am now writing at Gen. Custer's desk. It is reported that Indians are seen several miles off—probably their scouts who are out to watch our movements. This goes back in a few moments by couriers, who are to take the mail through by night. Of course they carry their lives in their hands, and some of them may never reach. I shall send word, so as to keep you posted, at each opportunity. You will see plenty of newspaper accounts of our doings, and I know they will be the more interesting to you that I am concerned in all that is done out here.

Document D:

Source: "General William Tecumseh Sherman, newspaper interview, July 6, 1876"

"our purpose is to drive these Indians, who are the wildest and most savage sort, down on the reservation. Montana is the most promising of our territories. It is settled by an intelligent people, among who are many old soldiers, and it is the richest and most promising of our settlements. These Indians have been annoying the settlers; and we are to drive them down on the reservation. You can say we will do it now exterminate them."
Document E


Salt Lake City, July 5th:

The special correspondent of the Helena (Montana) Herald writes, from Stillwater, Montana, under the date of July 2, as follows:

"Muggins Taylor, a scout for Gen. Gibbons, arrived here last night from Little Big 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 operations of this detachment, except their course is 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 bother-in-law were all killed, and not one of his detachment escaped..."

"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 left. The Seventh fought like tigers, and were overcome by mere brute force..."

"This report is given as Tyalor told it, as he was over the field after the battle. The above is confirmed by others which say Custer has me a fearful disaster."
Document F:

Source: "Massacre by the Indians" Morning News, Savannah, Georgia, July 7, 1876

Chicago, July 6:

A dispatch confirming the report of Gen. Custer's fight on the Little Big Horn river has just been received at Gen. Sheridan's headquarters...

"General Hancock, Secretary Chandler, and Postmaster Jewel were with the President today in consultation over the Indian situation. The War Department received this afternoon confirmatory reports of the newspaper accounts, which gave them first intimation of the disaster. The following was received this evening from Sheridan's headquarters at Chicago, signed by Adjutant General Donan:

"Dispatches from General Terry dated at his camp at the mouth of the Big Horn, confirm the newspaper reports of a fight on June 25th on the Little Big Horn and of Custer's death. Terry has fallen back to his present camp. I have sent full dispatches to the Lieutenant General, who will probably communicate them. I have not yet received General Terry's report of the action or list of casualties."
**Document G:**

Source: *State Journal, Columbus, Ohio, July 7, 1876*

"He was a very severe disciplinarian, and it was only by the most supernatural daring in the face of the enemy that he was able to maintain a place in the esteem of his men...Custer was very striking figure, with his long yellow hair floating over his shoulders, his red neck-tie, his dashing hussar jacket, and a wide brimmed, bandit-looking hat thrown backward on his head... If Custer is gone, the Army has lost it most impetuous and daring cavalryman."

**Document H:**


"Sitting Bull's band of Sioux left their reservation with hostile intent. They refused negotiations for peace. They defied the power and authority of the United States. They invited war. A force was sent against them. This force became divided, and Gen. Custer, with five companies, coming up to the support of the remainder of the column. The result was that the entire body of men...fell into a death trap; they were overwhelmed by superior numbers and were all slaughtered. The precise particulars of that horrible catastrophe will never be known. There were no survivors."
Document I:

Source: "Little Big Horn Massacre" editorial, Morning News, Savannah, July 7, 1876

For this record of blood and massacre a fearful responsibility rests somewhere. There is good reason to believe that the present Indian was is fruit of a reckless, corrupt and faithless Indian policy on the part of the government. Be that as it may, since the war has been provoked the government should at least employ prompt and effective means to put an end to the conflict. A few such experiences as that just reported, will convince the authorities at Washington that it is more than imprudent, that it is criminal to send out small bodies of troops to cope with the infuriated savages of the Northwestern frontier. The trouble in the Black Hills country has been brewing for the year past, and the government ought to have taken measures to conciliate the Indians or it should long since have exhibited a force on the frontier sufficient either to deter them from hostilities, or to speedily subdue them. But instead of concentrating its troops within striking distance of the hostile tribes, and keeping a watchful eye on their movements, the soldiers have been scattered through the peaceful and law-abiding communities of the Southern States, and the military authorities have been more occupied with preparations for a military Presidential campaign in the South, than with the measures to protect the Indian frontier. And now that the Indians are on the war path, small detachments of troops are exposed to surprise and massacre by the over-whelming numbers of wily and ferocious savages, while thousands of soldiers are idling away their days in glorious ease in Southern garrisons.
In 1869, the United States concluded a treaty with the Indians...known generally as Sioux, whereby the eastern half of this enormous region was set apart for their occupation use. The western line of the region thus ceded to the Indians was the 104th meridian, which runs through the western portion of the Black Hills, leaving about two-thirds of them in the region ceded to the Sioux. It was also agreed in this treaty that all the country lying between the 104 meridian also agreed in this treaty that all the country lying between 104th meridian, and the Big Horn Mountains and between the North Platte and the Yellowstone should be unceded Indian territory; and that no white person should be permitted to occupy or settle upon the same, or even to pass through it without the consent of the Indians. It was further agreed that the line of federal posts...running across the southwestern portion of the area should be abandoned. By this treaty the east half of this area of 240,000 square miles was given to the Indians for occupation—agencies, farms, schools, and the like...

That treaty is in existence today, having never been repealed or modified in any particular.

From these statements, the public will be prepared to easily comprehend the cause of the present war and its extent. In brief without abrogation of the treaty with the Sioux, the Black Hills country was invaded by immigrants in search of gold. The Sioux resent this invasion, and commenced to attack immigrant trains. They in turn were attacked by United States troops...

As to the moral quality of the Indians question in reference to the present outbreak, there might be much said, were it in an appropriate occasion. Whether a war is just or not should be settled either before or after its occurrence and not during it operation. Now that the was is in progress, it should be fought out, until the hostile Indians are thoroughly subdued. When that shall be done, then will it be in order to debate this truth: our people have just the same right to go into the Black Hills, while the present treaty unrepealed, that the people of Mexico would have to raid into, and take possession of, the city of Chicago, and that the Indians have the same right to defend their country against invasion that have Americans, or any other nation or community.
Document K:

Source: Crazy Horse. (www.indians.org/welker/crazyhor.htm)

"A very great vision is needed and the man who has it must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue sky. I was hostile to the white man...we preferred hunting to a life of idleness on our reservations. At times we did not get enough to eat and we were not allowed to hunt. All we wanted was peace and to be left alone. Soldiers came and destroyed our villages. Then Long Hair (Custer) came...They say we massacred him, but he would done the same to us. Our first impulse was to escape but we were so hemmed in and had to fight."

Crazy Horse, as Remembered by Ohiyesa (Charles A. Eastman)

Comments about Crazy Horse.

He was an uncommonly handsome man...he was physically perfect, an Apollo in symmetry. He was modest and courteous. He was gentle warrior, a true brave, who stood for the highest ideal of the Sioux.
Report on the Battle of the Little Big Horn

Camp on the Yellowstone River, 5 July 1876

The command of the regiment having developed upon me as he senior surviving officer from the battle of 25 and 26th of June, between the Seventh Cavalry and Sitting Bull’s band of hostile Sioux, on the Little Bighorn River, I have the honor to submit the following report:

...Still hearing nothing of Custer, and, with this re-enforcement, I moved down river in the direction of the village, keeping on the bluff.

We had heard firing in that direction and knew it could only be Custer. I moved to the summit of the highest bluff, but seeing and hearing nothing sent Captain Weir with his company to open communication with him. He soon sent word by Lieutenant Hare that he could go no farther, and that the Indians were getting around him. At this time he was keeping up heavy fire from his skirmish line. I at once turned everything back to the first position I had taken on the bluffs, and which seemed to me the best. I dismounted, the men and the horses and mules of the pack-train driven together in a depression, put the men on the crests of the hills making the depression, and had hardly done so when I was furiously attacked. This was 6 p.m. We held our ground, with a loss of eighteen enlisted men killed and forty-six wounded, until the attack ceased, about 9 p.m. As I knew by their overwhelming numbers and had given up any support from that portion of the regiment with Custer, I had men dig rifle pits, barricade with dead horses and mules, and boxes of hard bread, the opening of the depression toward the Indians in which the animals were herded, and made every exertion to be ready for what I saw would be a terrific assault the next day. All this might night the men were busy, and the Indians holding a scalping dance underneath us in the bottom and in our hearing. On the morning of the 26th I felt confident that I could hold me own, and was ready, as far as I could be, when daylight, 2:30 a.m. I heard the crack of two rifles. This was the signal for the beginning of a fire that I have never equaled. Every rifle was handled by an expert skilled marksman, and with a range that exceeded our carbines, and it was simply impossible to show any part of the body before it was struck. We could see, as the day brightened, countless hordes of them pouring up the valley from the village and scampering over the high points toward the places designated for them by their chiefs, and which entirely surrounded our position. They had sufficient numbers to completely encircle us, and men were struck from opposite sides of the lines from where the shots were fired. I think we were fighting all the Sioux Nation, and also all the desperados, renegades, half-breeds and squaw-men between the Missouri and the Arkansas and east of the Rocky Mountains, and they must have numbered at least twenty-five hundred warriors.
Sitting Bull sprang up and throwing aside the door of the council lodge, limped as fast as he could toward his own tepee, not far off. It was nearest to the soldiers. While he was hurrying, there was a yell of alarm. A man was painting, yelling and everyone turned to look where he pointed—South-upriver. There in the bottoms they saw a tower of dust coming, and in it, as it came, the blue shirts of soldiers, the heads of horse! While they stared, the column of soldiers widened into a line, smoke boomed from its front, and they heard the snarl of the carbines.

Sitting Bull hurried to his tepee to get his arms. He had a revolver, caliber .45 and an 1873 model carbine Winchester...In the tent he found One Bull bent on the same errand...Already the bullets were whining overhead, and one of the tent poles was splintered above them...

All around him was confusion. Old men were yelling advice, women and children rushing off on foot and on horseback to the north end of that three-mile camp, fleeing from soldiers. They left their tents standing, grabbed their babies, called their older children, and hurried away, frightened girls shrinking under their shaws, matrons puffing for breath, hobbling old women, wrinkled and peering, with their sticks, making off as best could, crying children, lost children, dog getting in everybody's way and being kicked for their pains, nervous horses resisting the tug of the reins, and over all the sound of the shooting. First of all, Sitting Bull saw that his old mother was safely mounted and on her way...

Sitting Bull was puzzled by Reno's behavior. He had come against the huge camp with a handful, and then—instead of charging, the only way could hope to fight his way through—he had dismounted his men and was fighting them afoot. Sitting Bull thought Reno was acting like a fool. But Sitting Bull was much too intelligent to underestimate his enemy. He wondered what was up. Therefore he remained with the warriors to the north of the troops, between the camp and the enemy. "Look out!" he yelled "there must be some trick about this."

Such skill in forecasting the enemies movements, such canny sizing-up of a situation, were what made Sitting Bull peerless as leader of the warlike Sioux. Brave men were plenty in their camps: but a man who combined intelligence and skill and courage Sitting Bull did was hardly to be found. He knew, as Napoleon knew—and said—that "battle are won by the power of the mind!"
How could it have happened? What flagrant blunders produced so awful a debacle? How could a commander and a regiment widely perceived as the bests on the frontier succumb so spectacularly to a mob of untrained, unlettered natives?

The simplest answer, usually overlooked, is the army lost largely because the Indians won. To ascribe defeat entirely to military failings is to devalue Indian strength and leadership. The Sioux and the Cheyenne were strong, confident, united, well led, well armed, outraged by the government's war aims, and ready to fight if pressed. Rarely had the army encountered such a mighty combination in and Indian adversary. Perhaps no strategy or tactics could have prevailed against Sitting Bull's power.

But this explanation exonerates all the military chiefs and yields no scapegoat in blue. George Armstrong Custer is the favored candidate. Driven to win a great victory...He attacked...with and exhausted command and without adequate reconnaissance...he divided his force in the fact of superior enemy and then lost control of all the elements retained under his personal command.

Custer was not concerned with how many Indians he would encounter, only with preventing their flight. Knowledge of their actual strength would not have changed his disposition. He had total confidence in the Seventh Calvary to defeat the Indians.

So did all other generals, from Sheridan on down. Most experience with Indian warfare showed that a charge into a village, however, large, wrought panic and fleeing Indians... Custer cannot be faulted for a mindset shared with his fellow commanders.

It was a mindset, indeed, shared with his fellow citizens and thus in large part derived from them. That the generals had such contempt for the fighting prowess of their foes as to care little for their numbers was but one symptom of society's attitudes toward Indians. The cultural and racial arrogance of the American people found expression in their generals. Combined with the person conceit of Custer, this was a deadly mixture.
Source: "An Eye Witness Account of the Custer Battle by Gall" Reported by Usher L. Burdick, Indian Notes on the Custer Battle. By a Mr. D.F. Barry. Barry was a well-known photographer of the West who took this account when he visited the battle sight ten years after it happened. He reportedly took down the narration of the Siouan Indian Chief Gall.

It took about thirty-five minutes to wipe out this bunch of soldiers (Custers) and I never saw men fight harder. They were right down on their knees firing and loading until the last man fell. I never saw any soldier surrender. The smoke and dust was so thick that we could not always see the soldiers. The soldiers were fighting on foot, so finally we rode over them with our ponies. Our ponies were well rested and fast runners, but the soldiers' horses were hungry and they were eating grass while the battle was going on and our braves had no difficulty in catching all of them.

Just how these soldiers were divided, I do not know. We never saw the pack train (McDougall's Command) until it joined Reno on the hill. First we noticed several companies of soldiers about two miles east of our camp, marching along the bluffs, in the direction of the lower end our camp. These soldiers kicked up lots of dust and they came in sight the second time about hours after noon. They were mounted on white horses and a nice sight to see... We watched these soldiers and we were rounding up our pony herd so we could fight if the soldiers attacked us...

Very soon we heard a great amount of shooting in that direction, Crazy Horse rushed through our camp headed in that direction of the shooting and his men followed; I started that way too. About two thousand warriors finally gathered down where the shooting was (Reno's Command).

As soon as we chased the soldiers out, we did not fight them again right away. Crow King and Crazy Horse were afraid the soldiers that we had seen marching in the direction of the north end of the camp, (that they) might kill our women and children. They went back the way they had come. Ride down there and you can see from here. This gulley is so deep that no one can see you from here. This gulley, the upper part, brought Crow King very close to the soldiers. Crazy horse went to the extreme north end of the camp, turned right and went up another deep ravine and came close to the soldiers on the north side with Crow King on the South side.

It was about a little after 2:30 pm when this part of battle began. The soldiers was falling all around; they were on foot and their horses were in the upper end of the ravine where Crazy Horse was.

We either killed or ran over these and went on down to where the last soldiers were. They were fighting good. The dust and smoke was black as evening. Once in a while we could see the soldiers through the dust, and finally we charged through them with our ponies. When we had done this right here on this ground, just a few rods South of us, the fight was over.
Thesis statement:

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Conclusions: