

**LIFE**

# Our Indian Heritage



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The tragedy of Little Bighorn  
was that it sealed white minds  
against the American Indian

# The Custer Myth



In an 1870s' photograph Custer (center) poses with some of his men and a Crow Indian scout after killing a bear.

by ALVIN M. JOSEPHY JR.


**T**he last time I visited Custer Battlefield National Monument on the high, tawny plains of south central Montana, Dustin Hoffman and Arthur Penn were there, shooting *Little Big Man*, the movie which deals sympathetically with the Indians who fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. But inside the little museum just below the hill where Custer made his last stand, the National Park Service historians were giving their usual narrative lectures to the tourists grouped around the table model of the battlefield. I was in the museum with some Indian friends: a Cheyenne from Oklahoma, a Sioux family from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, and two Yakima kids from the state of Washington. They were dressed in jeans and open-necked, snap-button shirts, and appeared very much part of the crowd listening to the lecture. But it was obvious they did not like what they were hearing. They kept glancing at each other as if they were not quite sure if it was all right for them to be there.

"Something's happening these days," one of the lecturers was saying. "We better all be aware of it. Self-styled historians are deliberately tarnishing Custer—casting innuendos on him and on the men who fought here. It may be part of a scheme to undermine our traditions and our beliefs in the American army."

When the historian finally went into his account of the battle

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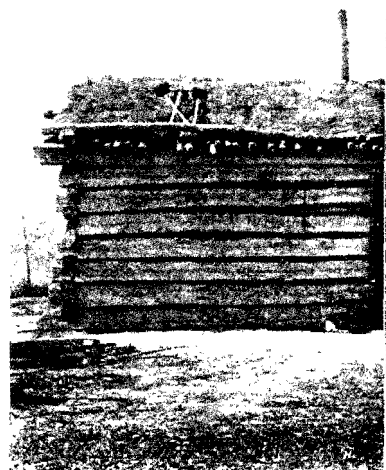
*The author, an editor for American Heritage, specializes in Indian history. His books include The Indian Heritage of America and The Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Resistance.*



A proud headdress is one of the few relics of Crazy Horse, the chief who routed Custer.



Two Strike, a Sioux chief of the Brulé tribe, is seen (left, above) leading a small party to a tribal ceremony in the mid-1890s.



Sioux warrior Crow Dog (below in a 1900 picture) was present when the army arrested and later killed Crazy Horse.

## 'Crazy Horse was a great man, not a savage'

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and remarked that "a horde of savages" under Crazy Horse had swept in from the north to surround Custer, one of the Yakima boys started knotting and unknitting his fists. The Cheyenne motioned for them all to leave, and they moved shyly through the rear of the crowd. Off by themselves, they pretended to examine the cases of Indian clothing, implements and weapons, the museum's gesture to "the enemy" at the battle. That is the way the whites were supposed to know the Indians: dead, dehumanized museum objects, not real people.

"Crazy Horse," muttered the Rosebud Sioux father in a low voice. "He was a great man. He fought for his people. He was no savage. He was patriotic to the Indian people. That's why they murdered him."

**A**fter their victory over Custer at the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, the Sioux and Cheyenne bands separated and tried to evade the punitive armies that poured onto the plains to round them up. One by one, the harried Indian groups surrendered or came voluntarily into the government agencies. The winter of 1876-77 was cold, and the holdouts starved. In February, Sitting Bull and Gall crossed their band into Canada, where they stayed in exile until 1881. But Crazy Horse's Oglalas struggled to stay free, striking back again and again in snow and fog at troops that followed closely on their trail. Chiefs who had surrendered sent emissaries to Crazy Horse, urging him to give up and bring his people into the safety of a reservation. He refused, and the longer he held out and fought back, the higher his prestige rose among the Indians who had already surrendered. Finally, he could no longer face



the suffering of his people. Proud that he had not been defeated in battle, he marched his band, the last of the Sioux "hostiles," into the Red Cloud Agency on May 5, 1877. But his defiance of the whites continued, and the officials at the agency began to fear that he was planning an uprising. Four months after his surrender, he was lured to a guardhouse at Fort Robinson near the agency and, in a sudden scuffle, was bayoneted to death by a soldier. Crazy Horse was 37 years old. Because of his many war exploits, his able leadership in battle and—most of all—his long, uncompromising resistance to the whites, he became the Sioux's greatest hero, and his legend still grows

among American Indians today. Mari Sandoz, a white author, has written a sympathetic biography of him but, like her other books on Indians, including one of the finest accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn ever written, her biography of Crazy Horse was not on sale at the battlefield museum. Dozens of other books by lesser authors were displayed, but nothing by Mari Sandoz. "Her stuff is no good on the battle," one of the historians told me.

That was two years ago, 93 years after the ambitious, glory-chasing—maybe crazed—Civil War hero Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer led five troops of his Indian-fighting Seventh Cavalry to death and legend. It was

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The tar-paper shacks (right) on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota today are nearly as primitive as the dirt-floored cabins (left) the government built there for the Indians in the early 1900s. At that time they still preferred their tepees.



Crow and Sioux Indians, traditional enemies in the past, held a powwow on the Crow Reservation near Hardin, Mont., July 1969 (below). Such tribal ceremonies are again beginning to play a role in Indian life.



# There was barbarism on both sides— but whites wrote the book



The engraving above, from a New York newspaper in 1877, illustrates the elaborate funeral services held at Fort Leavenworth for Custer's officers who died at Little Bighorn. The photograph below, taken in 1890, shows some of the 300 Indian victims of the massacre at Wounded Knee being dumped into a mass grave.



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not the U.S. Army's worst defeat at the hands of Indians. In 1791, Little Turtle and the chiefs of confederated Ohio Valley tribes almost annihilated Gen. Arthur St. Clair's army and killed more than 600 of his men on the headwaters of the Wabash River. But the Little Bighorn was bad enough. No one knows how many Indians were in the nine circles of tepee villages strung along the Montana stream that day—estimates have ranged as high as 15,000, including warriors—but Custer lost almost 250 men in his foolishness.

The movie people making *Little Big Man* caricatured Custer, took their cue from the worst that has been said about him and played full blast upon his arrogance and madness. It made the National Park Service officials who administer the battlefield quite angry, and they refused to cooperate with the film company. It did not matter. The government owns only two patches of the battlefield, the high ridge where Custer made his last stand and the hilltop several miles away, where Maj. Marcus Reno and other troops of Custer's divided command withstood successfully a 24-hour siege by the Indians. In between, where Custer is thought by many to have launched his at-

tack down the Medicine Tail Coulee from the high ground to the river, the land is owned by Crow Indians, whose large reservation surrounds the battlefield, and they were delighted to lease the coulee to the film company. The Crow are a jolly people who get a kick—sometimes a perverse one—out of playing with history. They used to be enemies of the Sioux, and some of their ancestors served as scouts for Custer—until they caught a glimpse of the size of the Sioux and Cheyenne villages and rode hurriedly away before the fighting started. But now every June the Crow pretend to be Sioux and reenact the battle for tourists, which disgusts the real Sioux over in South Dakota. And because the Crow were handy to the movie site and could turn out several hundred horsemen who would look like Sioux warriors, they played the role of the Sioux again in *Little Big Man*.

**T**he making of *Little Big Man*, which deals understandingly with the Indians' culture as well as their fate, is a hopeful sign of a new trend, reappraising the Indian and the white man's caricaturization of him as a savage. As with any stereotype the caricature had a basis in fact. Indian cultures often permitted codes of war that were accepted by the tribes but were ferocious to the whites, and Indians who fought desperately against the whites for their lives, lands and freedom enraged their enemies with atrocities, tortures and massacres like those at Deerfield and Cherry Valley. (The Indian is equated with scalping, but no one really knows who started it. The Dutch at New Amsterdam and the Spaniards in the Southwest paid bounties at an early date for Indian scalps, and it is known that whites spread the practice of scalp-taking to tribes that had never indulged in it.) In truth, there was ample barbarism on both sides. But the whites were the winners, and they wrote the books, and until now they have carefully ignored their own treatment of the Indians, and especially what the white man looked like in the eyes of the Indian. Today, the Indians themselves are forcing these things to our attention. In the mid-1960s, cars owned by Indians in Montana and the Dakotas began bearing bumper plates that read: "Custer Died for Your Sins."

Why Custer?

A Nez Percé Indian in Idaho, the grandson of a man who had fought for freedom against American armies with the great Chief Joseph, once explained accurately: "The white man's knowledge of Indians is based on stereotypes and false, prejudiced history. Custer is the best-known hero of that myth to the whites. Therefore, to every Indian in the country he is the biggest and most important symbol of all the lies that have been told about us. Destroy

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This photograph of Chief Big Foot, leader of the Miniconjou Sioux, was taken as he lay dead in the snow after the U.S. cavalry had massacred 300 of his tribe at Wounded Knee in 1890. Big Foot had been trying to lead them to another reservation where they hoped they would be better treated.

## It was 'civilization or death to all savages'

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the Custer myth, the biggest one of all, and you'll start getting an understanding of everything that happened and an end to the bias against the Indian people."

To the Indians, the Custer battlefield is a place that keeps alive a jaundiced, ethnocentric and therefore false view of the long struggle between themselves and the white invaders of their lands. If Indian historians were among the interpreters and lecturers at the museum, it might be different. But as the National Park Service presently administers it, the battlefield is a sore from America's past that has not healed.

There are similar sores across the map of America, from the Pequot country in Connecticut and the Powhatan country of Virginia to the Nisqually River at Puget Sound and the former acorn-gathering grounds of Indians who were shot down for sport by forty-niners in California. Custer's attack against the Indian villages at Little Bighorn is best known because of the drama of his defeat and the dark mystery of what he was doing and what, precisely, happened to him.

But there were many other assaults on Indians—often surprise attacks on peaceful villages—that worked. A few of those "battles," which present-day Indians regard as true massacres, are known to the whites. Most of them are forgotten.

One has perhaps heard of the Big Hole in western Montana, where troopers in 1877 swept into a sleeping village of Chief Joseph's hounded Nez Percé, shooting and bayoneting

every Indian in sight. But scarcely anyone knows of the home village of Chief Looking Glass, also a Nez Percé, that was similarly attacked on a Sunday morning by federal troops in Idaho. The maddened massacre by Col. J. M. Chivington and his Colorado volunteers of a Cheyenne village at Sand Creek in 1864 is well known. But few know of the Sioux families who were roused from their sleep by troopers under Gen. W. S. Harney and shot and clubbed to death at the "battle" of Blue Water Creek in Nebraska in 1855.

There are many others. The battle of the Washita brought Custer and his Seventh Cavalry their first glory as Indian fighters in 1868. The women and children who died there, and at Lancaster, Pa. in 1763, at the Grande Ronde in Oregon in 1856, at Bad Axe in Wisconsin in 1832, at scores of villages and settlements in California, and at hundreds of other places they called home were, like the trees, being cleared away. They were no-people. They had no names. They had no right to life.

Why not?

On July 4, 1779, Maj. Gen. John Sullivan's officers, who were about to invade the Iroquois country of western New York State, drank a toast: "Civilization or death to all American savages." His words bluntly state the policy which the white man has directed from the first against the Indian—which Custer, Harney, Chivington and the other military men, as instruments of that national mandate, carried out for the non-Indian American people, and which some whites continue to regard, though

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# The Indians had what the whites wanted—land

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with different words, as the only way to deal with the Indian people on reservations even today.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the first colonists along the Atlantic coast looked upon the Indians, found them different and judged them therefore as inferior. It is a fact that everywhere the Indians greeted the first settlers with friendship. The Indians, reported Capt. Christopher Newport, commander of the colonists' ships at Jamestown in 1607, were supposed to be treacherous, "howbeit we could not finde it in o'r travell up the river, but rather a most kind and loving people." In New York the Manhattes brought food and other gifts to the Dutch in 1609, and even in Massachusetts, where earlier traders had kidnapped, enslaved and spread disease among the Indians, the Pilgrims were welcomed and instructed in how to survive in the harsh new world by Samoset, Squanto and the Wampanoag chief, Massasoit.

The Christian newcomers viewed Indian societies from their own European-based point of view, failing, with rare exceptions, to understand or appreciate their complex customs and traits and the richness and self-sufficiency of their cultures. What they saw they condemned as "satanic" and uncivilized because it was strange. But they were weak and the Indians were strong, and for a while the settlers found it necessary to live peaceably side by side with the natives.

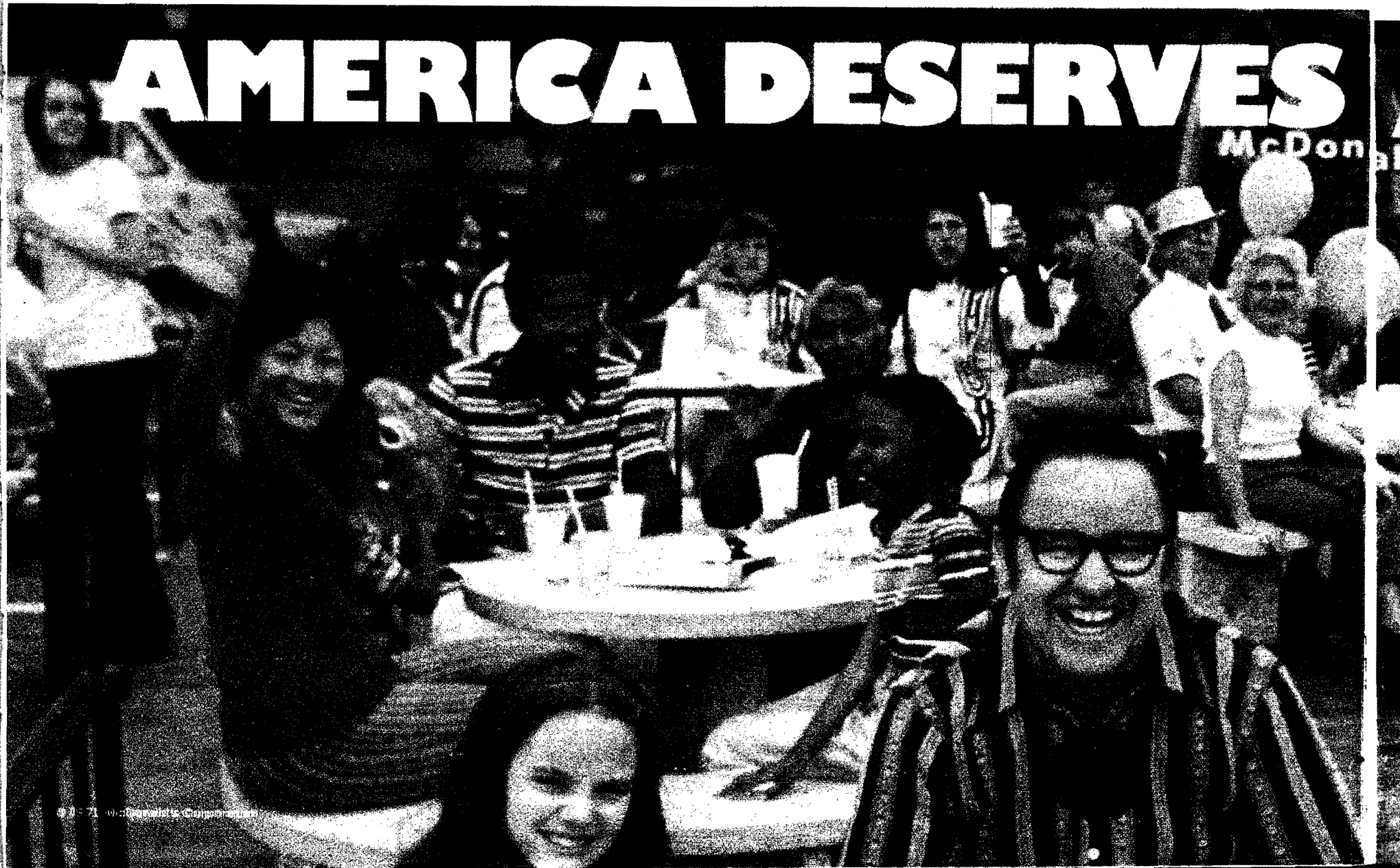
Not for long. The Indians had what the white man wanted—land—and the greed for the Indians' property, which was never to end,

exploded finally in Virginia, Connecticut and Massachusetts in the first of the frontier wars. The Powhatans, Pequots and Wampanoags went down under fire and sword, fighting for their homelands, and the desperation of their resistance created the enduring image of the "savage" Indian. From then on, there could be no co-existence. As the whites pressed westward, justifying their hunger for Indian land with the belief that the laws of God and nature directed them to take the earth from those who "wasted" it, they saw only what they wanted to see in the Indian.

The Indian had one escape route: to become a white man. Cut his hair, adopt Christianity, wear white men's clothes and settle down as a farmer or mechanic. If he gave up his "inferior" values, adopted those of the white man and melted into the general population so that he was indistinguishable from everybody else and no further trouble to anyone, he could live. On every frontier, missionaries worked on the "wild" Indians to save them before a land-grabber shot them. It was a fearful choice for an Indian, who was told to stop being what he was and be someone else. Thousands of Indians survived by shedding their cultures, their loyalties and often their identities. Many more Indians resisted: even if they could drop their Indian-ness, they were too proud of what they already were and not at all convinced of the superiority of the white man's values.

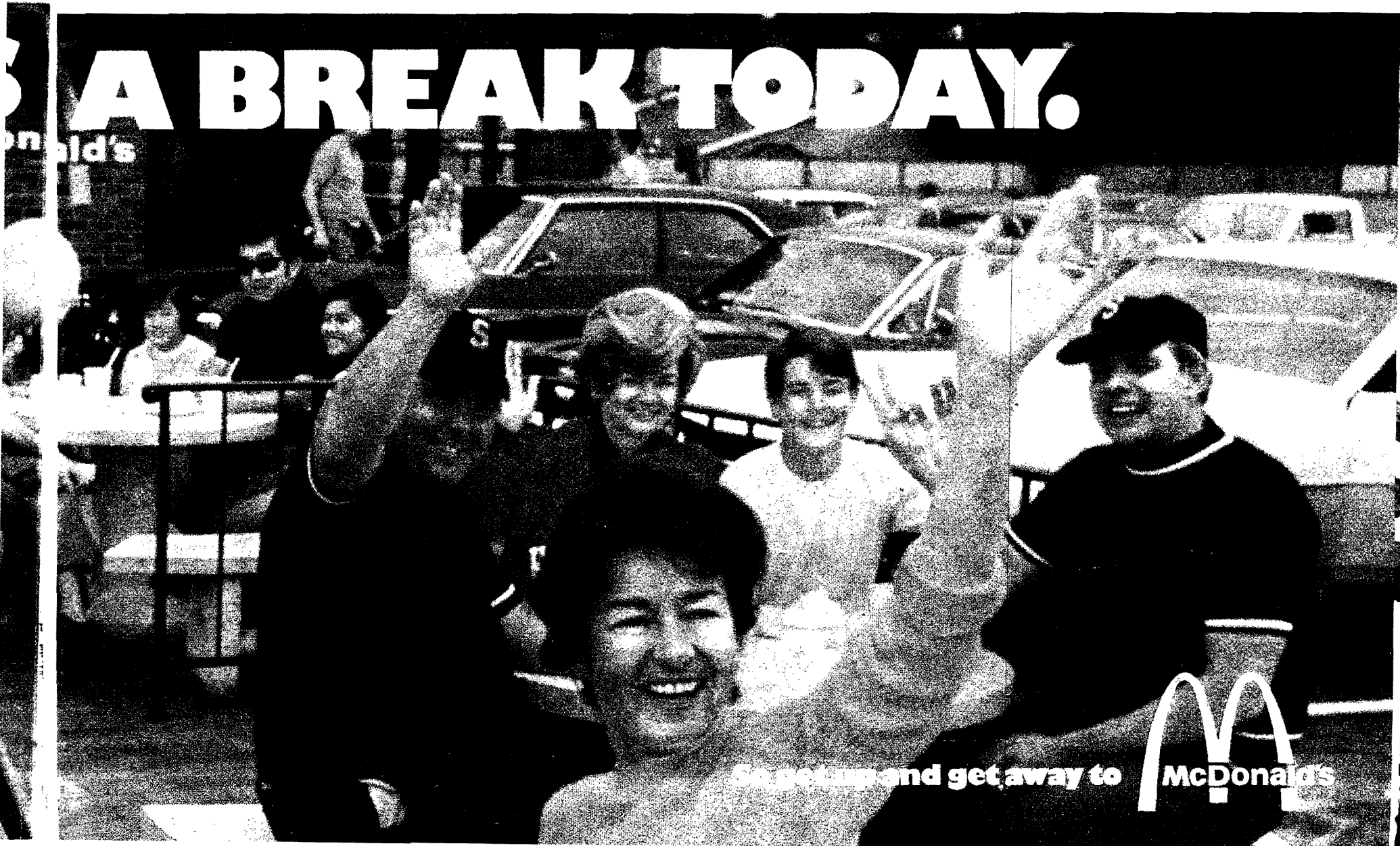
**N**evertheless, the two strains—civilization and extermination—marched through American history from King Philip's War in 17th-century New England to the massacre at Wounded Knee, S. Dak. on Dec. 29, 1890. Behind the frontier, where the Indians' power no longer existed, the national aim could be stated more benignly, as it was by Jefferson and other leaders of the federal government: "The Indians must assimilate or they will die out."

No tribe fought harder to live its own way, unmolested on its



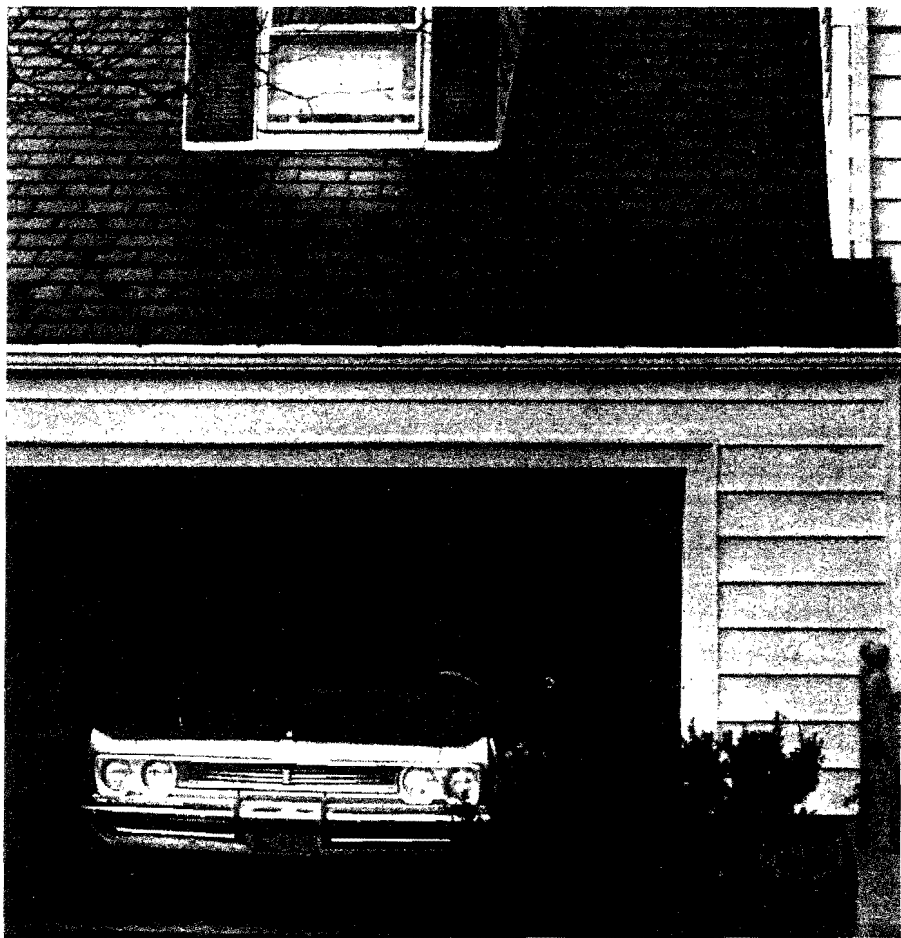
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Settlers were lured into the Indians' territory in the Dakotas during the 1870s by handbills like this one from the Chicago and North-Western Railway, which promised them free land.





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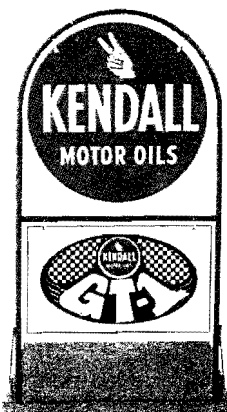
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## Custer's death demanded revenge

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"massacre" of Custer, who was leading one of the forces trying to round up the "hostiles," proved the point. Thus the myth of Custer was born (pictured graphically on saloon walls throughout the country). The story of brave, surrounded troopers fighting to the last on a lonely Montana hilltop was told. But nothing of a broken treaty; nothing of a power-crazed officer who lured miners into the Sioux country; nothing of Custer's slaughter of women and children at the Washita.

The Sioux eventually lost the Black Hills. The army had to crush the perpetrators of the outrage on Custer, and no mercy was shown. The soldiers who chased the Sioux all over the plains during the winter after Little Bighorn may have wondered why the government had got in such a mess over some greedy gold-seekers, but they also knew that national honor demanded that Custer be avenged and that the Indians be taught who was the master. The buffalo, on which the Indians depended for their food, was all but exterminated, and the members of the harried Sioux bands starved and died on the trail. Gradually the holdouts were rounded up and put on reservations. The troops secured the Black Hills—for which the Sioux have never been justly paid—and opened the plains to the cowboys and nesters.

**B**ut the hatred for the Indian who frustrated and embarrassed the white man went on. The reservations were prisons, and the Indians lived in misery and semistarvation, lacking every freedom and suffering punishment for every offense, real or imagined, from practicing their own religion to "sauciness." The Indians made desperate attempts to escape from their persecutors. The climax came in 1890, when Big Foot's band of Miniconjou Sioux, fearful of punishment for practicing their so-called "Ghost Dance" religion, stole away from their reservation in the middle of the winter and tried to travel to another one, where they hoped for better treatment. The great Sitting Bull, suspected of having planned an uprising by the Ghost Dancers, had just been murdered.

Troops of the reconstituted Seventh Cavalry intercepted the fleeing Miniconjou at Wounded Knee, S.Dak., herded them in a knot and surrounded them. The Indians were cold, hungry and in rags and had no thought of resistance. But after most of them were disarmed, a gun went off accidentally. The troops opened fire on them, and from a hilltop above the wild melee, Hotchkiss machine guns raked the swirling mass of people. Some 60 soldiers were killed or wounded—most, if not all, by their own men. Almost 300 Indian men, women and children perished, and their bodies several days later were thrown in a single grave.

The long, rectangular common grave, edged with a concrete curb and tended by the Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation, is still there. But the flat where the Indians huddled is all but covered by the macadam of a road intersection. There is, of course, no national memorial to Wounded Knee.

It was the last serious armed confrontation between Indians and whites in the United States. But today, 81 years after Wounded Knee, the national Indian policy still discriminates harshly against them. Voice has often been given, most recently by President Nixon in July 1970, to the Indians' right to manage and control their own affairs and to be Indians if they wish to be. But non-Indian public opinion still believes that an Indian cannot be happy unless he is like most other Americans. Since the final defeat of the tribes, every act of Congress and every program of each administration that dealt with general Indian policy has been designed to speed the Indians' assimilation. The guns have long since ceased but, say the Indians, cultural genocide has not stopped.

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# They are still the poorest of the poor

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On most reservations, the agents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs still manage and control the Indians' most important affairs, depriving them of initiative and the right to do what they think is best. The Department of the Interior still maintains veto power over most Indian decisions, as well as over tribal finances, use of lands, selection of lawyers, and even the drafting of individual wills. The Indians are the poorest of the poor, with the highest unemployment, the lowest standard of living, and the worst health and housing of any Americans.

In Nevada there is hatred today for Paiute Indians who are trying to regain water, diverted from them by a white man's irrigation project, so that they can save their Pyramid Lake and its fish. At Puget Sound there is hatred for the Nisqually and Puyallup Indians who are fighting, sometimes with guns, for their treaty-guaranteed fishing rights. In the Southwest there is hatred for the Hopi and Navajo traditionalists who want to stop the strip-mining of coal on their reservations, a step that would halt the fuel supply for white men's power plants. In the town of Gregory on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, Indian children who attend school with whites are constantly warned that they must learn to get along with the whites or "get out." This June, the guidance counselor at the high school quit his job and moved away because of disgust with his superiors' acquiescence in the bigotry practiced against the Sioux students. "I couldn't beat the system," he said.

The nearby city of Winner, also on Rosebud, is worse. One block off the main street is Indian Town, where 72 Sioux families live in hovels that lack sanitation facilities, running water, electricity and heat, and yet cost them up to \$50 a month in rent. Some of the buildings are old railroad shacks, one-room, 8'x10' in size, and Indian families have been paying rent on them for more than 20 years. The rest of Winner's streets are paved, but not those in Indian Town. Most of the descendants of the warriors who live there are afraid of the white fathers of the town, who on several occasions have turned aside their requests for joint action with the Rosebud Tribe to erect new housing for them in a healthier location. John Fire, an elderly Uwipi medicine man, recently brought suit against the city government for discrimination against the Indians, but few people expect anything to come of it.

"Indian-hating," wrote Herman Melville in 1857, "still exists; and, no doubt, will continue to exist, so long as Indians do." ■

This saloon near the Pine Ridge Reservation in S. Dak. still carries an old "No Indians Allowed" sign. A few years ago an Indian who walked into the saloon was shot and killed by a cowboy.



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