

The Battle of the Little Bighorn Lesson Plan

Central Historical Questions: *Who was responsible for the Battle of Little Bighorn?*

Materials:

- Copies of Textbook Excerpt
- Copies of Battle of Little Bighorn Documents A and B
- Copies of Battle of Little Bighorn Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introductory Lecture:

- *In the decades following the Civil War, the United States engaged in a number of conflicts with Native American tribes living west of the Mississippi. Some historians refer to these conflicts as “The Indian Wars.”*
- *The primary issue of the Indian Wars was land. The United States government made several treaties with Native American tribes to define Indian lands. However, as ever increasing numbers of Americans moved through, and sometimes settled on, Native American territory, these treaties were often ignored or broken by the government.*
- *Native Americans fought the United States for decades. They were ultimately overwhelmed by the superior numbers and weapons technology of the United States Army. Though on several occasions Native Americans defeated American troops in individual battles. One of the most famous of those Native American victories occurred at the Battle of Little Bighorn in Montana.*
- *On June 25, 1876 Civil War veteran George Custer attacked over 2000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors with a few hundred men; Custer and his men were overwhelmed and everyone of them were killed.*

2. Transition: *Today we are going to look at three different documents related to the Battle of the Little Bighorn: a textbook version of the battle; a letter to the President from the Secretary of War a month after the battle; and the recollections of a Native American woman about the battle from 1922.*

Our job is to analyze these sources and draw evidence from them in order to answer the question:

Who was responsible for the Battle of the Little Bighorn?

3. Hand out textbook passage. In pairs, students read textbook and answer the following questions:

- a) According to the textbook, what caused conflict between the Lakota Sioux and the U.S. government?
- b) Who started the Battle of Little Bighorn?
- c) Why did Custer lose?
- d) Do you think this account is an accurate description of the Battle of Little Bighorn? Why or Why not?

Discuss: Students share out answers.

4. Hand out Documents A and B, along with Guiding Questions. In pairs, students read documents and answer the Guiding Questions.

5. Discussion: Based upon what you have read and learned today, who was responsible for the Battle of the Little Bighorn?

Key points to address:

- What are the similarities and differences between these accounts?
- Why do they differ?
- Which one do you find most trustworthy? Why?
- What other types of documents would you need to look at in order to continue figuring out who was responsible for the Battle of the Little Bighorn?

6. Homework: Have students write a new textbook account of the Battle of Little Bighorn, drawing from information included in at least one of the primary documents.

Citations:

American Anthem, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 2006, p. 441.

J.D. Cameron, Letter to President Ulysses S. Grant, July 8, 1876.

<http://www.littlebighorn.info/Articles/gra8876.htm>

Kate Bighead, Interview with Dr. Thomas Marquis, 1922.

http://www.nmculturenet.org/heritage/kicking_bear/narrativ.htm

Textbook

Battle of Little Bighorn

For years the Lakota Sioux conducted raids against white settlers who had moved into Sioux lands. In response, the U.S. government ordered all Lakota Sioux to return to their reservation by January 31, 1876. They refused. The situation was turned over to the military.

About 2,000 Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho gathered near the Little Bighorn River. The leader of the Sioux, **Sitting Bull**, conducted a ceremonial sun dance. He reportedly had a vision of a great victory over soldiers.

The brash leader of the U.S. Army troops, Lieutenant Colonel **George Armstrong Custer**, predicted victory as well. On June 25, 1876, Custer led his troops into a headlong attack against superior numbers. Custer and his troops were quickly encircled and slaughtered. The **Battle of Little Bighorn** was a tremendous victory for the Sioux—but a temporary one. Now the U.S. government was even more determined to put down the Indian threat to settlers.

Source: American Anthem, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 2006, p. 441.

Guiding Questions:

1. According to the textbook, what caused conflict between the Lakota Sioux and the U.S. government?
2. Who started the Battle of Little Bighorn?
3. Why did Custer lose?
4. Do you think this account is an accurate description of the Battle of Little Bighorn? Why or Why not?

Document A: Cameron Report (Modified)

To the PRESIDENT:

Washington, July 8, 1876

There have been certain wild and hostile bands of Sioux Indians in Dakota and Montana. I refer to Sitting Bull's band and other bands of the Sioux Nation. These Indians continue to rove at pleasure, attacking scattered settlements, stealing horses and cattle, and murdering peaceful settlers and travelers.

The present military operations are not against the Sioux Nation at all, but against certain hostile parts of it that defy the Government. No part of these operations are on or near the Sioux reservation. The accidental discovery of gold on the western border of the Sioux reservation, and the settlement of our people there, have not caused this war. The young Indian warriors love war, and frequently leave the reservation to go on the hunt, or warpath. The object of these military operations was in the interest of the peaceful people of the Sioux Nation, and not one of these peaceful Indians have been bothered by the military authorities.

Very respectfully,
J. D. CAMERON, Secretary of War

Source: The President of the United States asked the Secretary of War, J.D. Cameron, for a report of the military actions leading up to the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Document B: Kate Bighead Interview (Modified)

Little Big Horn was not the first meeting between the Cheyennes and Long Hair [General Custer]. Early in the winter of 1868 Long Hair and the Seventh Cavalry attacked our camp on the Washita River killing Chief Black Kettle and his band, burning their tipis and destroying all their food and belongings. In the spring Long Hair promised peace and moved the Cheyenne to a reservation. When gold was discovered white people came and the Indians were moved again. My brothers and I left for the open plains where our band of Cheyenne was again attacked by white soldiers in the winter of 1875. We were forced to seek help from a tribe of Sioux. We joined Sitting Bull and the Sioux and decided to travel and hunt together as one strong group. As conditions on the reservations became worse more and more Indians moved west joining our group. Six tribes lived peacefully for several months, hunting buffalo, curing the meat for the winter months, and tanning buffalo hides. In the early summer, 1876 we set up camp near Little Big Horn River. Soldiers were spotted by some hunters to the south of the camp. . .

Source: Kate Bighead, a Cheyenne Indian, told this story to Dr. Thomas Marquis in 1922. Dr. Marquis was a doctor and historian of the Battle of Little Bighorn in the 1920s. He interviewed and photographed Cheyenne Indians.

Battle of Little Bighorn Guiding Questions

Name _____

Cameron Report

- 1) **Sourcing:** Who wrote this report? What was his purpose? When was it written?
- 2) **Contextualization:** According to this document, what was the cause of conflict between Indians of the Sioux nation and the U.S. Government?
- 3) **Contextualization:** Why would Cameron write: *“The accidental discovery of gold on the western border of the Sioux reservation, and the settlement of our people there, have not caused this war?”*
- 4) **Close Reading:** How does Cameron describe the Sioux Indians who he believes are attacking white settlements?
- 5) **Corroboration:** What are the similarities and differences between this report and the textbook?

Kate Bighead Interview

- 1) **Sourcing:** What type of document is this? When was it written? Why was it written?
- 2) **Contextualization:** According to Kate Bighead, what caused the conflict between the U.S. government and Native American tribes?
- 3) **Corroboration:** What are two differences between Bighead’s account and the Cameron report?
- 4) **Corroboration:** Which of the 2 documents – the Cameron report or the Kate Bighead interview – do you think is most trustworthy? Why?