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Crazy Horse and Custer

LESSONS IN FREEDOM THROUGH DISCIPLINE FROM TWO AMERICAN WARRIORS

BOOK: *CRAZY HORSE AND CUSTER: THE PARALLEL LIVES OF TWO AMERICAN WARRIORS* BY STEPHEN E. AMBROSE
BY MAJOR CHRISTOPHER T. STEIN

The central storyline details the lives of two men, “war lovers,” “men of aggression... men of supreme courage,” who “died as they lived—violently.”

The Sioux could not simultaneously be free and be effective soldiers. They chose to remain free.^[1]

On June 25, 1876, the parallel lives of two great—and fatally flawed—American warriors intersected near the Little Bighorn River in Montana. While we often remember this Battle of Little Bighorn, or Custer’s Last Stand, as a dramatic high point in the United States’ war on the American Indians, realistically it was but a last gasp of air by the dying American Indians who already had been thoroughly defeated and demoralized throughout the lands they once called home. Best-selling author Stephen E. Ambrose uses this battle, and the route its opposing iconoclast leaders took to get there, to show us that the United States’ victory over the American Indians was earned

not by tactical brilliance or moral righteousness, but rather through discipline. In this way, *Crazy Horse and Custer* is an *apologia* for the military justice system and the Judge Advocate General’s Corps.

Though weighing in at a heavy 527 pages in paperback, *Crazy Horse and Custer* is a breezy and engaging popular history that is easy to enjoy. In addition to best-sellers familiar to military officers, such as *Citizen Soldiers*, *The Wild Blue*, and *Band of Brothers*, *Crazy Horse and Custer* provides ample evidence that Ambrose’s “great gift was that he refused to allow people to think history was boring.”^[2] Rather than getting bogged down in inconsequential details and debates about the minutia of specific battles, Ambrose paints in broad brush strokes, giving the reader a riveting view of the landscape, the people, and the ideals at play in this Nineteenth Century American theater.

The central storyline details the lives of two men, “war lovers,” “men of aggression... [m]en of supreme courage,” who “died as they lived—violently.”[3] Crazy Horse and Custer were “outstanding warrior[s] in war-mad societies.”[4] The story is as much about those societies as about the men. Freedom, in the form of Crazy Horse’s Sioux, who maintained an independence like “the air they breathed or the wind that blew.”[5] Discipline, in the form of Custer’s U.S. Army and American society generally, where “every man had someone telling him what to do.”[6] Persuasively presented with themes that will resonate with military officers, readers must still keep in mind that “history is written by the victors.”[7] While the work is a valuable contribution to popular history, some readers rightly will be concerned by parts that seem to excuse despicable actions and by recent revelations that cast aspersions on Ambrose’s credibility as a historian.

FREEDOM – THE AMERICAN INDIANS

As the U.S. soldiers dragged him into the three-foot-by-six-foot cage that was to be his new home, Crazy Horse lashed out against his captors, refusing to give up the unchained freedom for which he had long lived.[8] The soldiers—to shouts of “Stab the son-of-a-bitch!” and “Kill him!”—quickly cut him down, delivering the final symbolic blow to any remaining vestiges of American Indian freedom and power.[9]

While pitiful when it happens, by this point in the story the reader knows it is inevitable that Crazy Horse the man will die, as had already the ideals for which he fought. The Crazy Horse people “embraced an idea. Their loyalty was not to family or band or tribe, but to freedom.”[10] The Sioux grew up with “practically no restraint.”[11] Young children nursed on the breast of whichever woman happened to be near, no one stopped them from learning through experience that fire is hot, and they toilet trained only by watching older children.[12] In other words, the Sioux lived “without compulsion.”[13] Crazy Horse did as he wished—he lived with whichever tribe he wanted, ate when it pleased him, slept when he was tired, and “neither took nor gave orders.”[14] When the ground got too dirty or the hunting too sparse, the tribe packed up and moved on.[15]

According to Ambrose, it was exactly this coercive law—or discipline—that the American Indians lacked and the American soldiers had that made all the difference.

In the midst of the relentless United States expansion westward in pursuit of “the doctrine of material progress,”[16] this “way...could no longer be tolerated.”[17] By the time of Crazy Horse’s death, the American Indians “were no longer free.”[18] The United States, through its Army and its traders, had imposed its values, insisted upon adoption of its economic system, and deprived the natives of their freedom of movement. By Ambrose’s telling, this was not inevitable; but because the American Indians were unwilling to sacrifice their freedom—to impose individual limitations for the sake of group survival—they lost it.

In illustrating this lesson, *Crazy Horse and Custer* fits well within the broader Great Conversation.[19] Even two thousand years ago, Cicero described how “unlimited license comes to a head” and “freedom itself plunges an over-free populace into slavery.”[20] During the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant lamented the “attachment of savages to lawless liberty” and their “preference of wild freedom” that leads to “incessant conflict with each other.”[21] Neither comment would feel out of place in *Crazy Horse and Custer*. As a solution, Cicero proposed that “law is the bond which holds together a community of citizens.”[22] Kant too agreed the antidote to “savage, lawless freedom” was submission to “public coercive law.”[23] According to Ambrose, it was exactly this coercive law—or discipline—that the American Indians lacked and the American soldiers had that made all the difference.

DISCIPLINE – THE U.S. ARMY

George Washington famously wrote: “Discipline is the soul of an army.”[24] Phrased slightly differently by Ambrose: “Discipline is what makes an army—and civilization.”[25] In this war between two great American societies, “[t]he crucial difference was discipline.”[26] Custer, despite his two court-

martial convictions,[27] “was disciplined... Crazy Horse was not.”[28] Custer’s America, because it was constrained, was “infinitely more productive than Crazy Horse’s.” [29] Crazy Horse’s Sioux were a “woefully inefficient people,” who, because they could do whatever they wanted, were “in the end unable to defend their way of life.”[30] Custer’s people, because of the discipline imparted by cultural norms and the rule of law, “could act in concert for a common objective, while Crazy Horse’s could not.”[31]

Multiple times the American Indians had the United States at a strategic disadvantage and yet their unrestrained individuality and personal freedom prevented them from capitalizing on it. When they fought “[n]o one directed the Indian assault—it was every man for himself.”[32] Where the U.S. Army went into battle in uniform, with individual interests subordinated to the group, the Sioux “went into battle in the most extreme, individualistic manner possible,” painting their bodies and their horses distinctly to stand out as individuals.[33] Where the United States was full of bosses, American Indian society “was, essentially, boss-less—no man could tell another what to do.”[34]

Custer had the power of the court-martial—coercive law that could overcome each individual’s preference for “wild freedom” and force soldiers to work toward national goals.

Given this absence of discipline, “[t]he Sioux failure to follow up their [military] advantage... was inevitable.”[35] They “would never have submitted to the discipline that alone could have made the follow-up campaign work.”[36] They would have had to empower leaders to “give orders and see to it that they were enforced,” and attack in concert with the object of destroying the enemy, rather than winning personal honors within the tribe. [37] In short, they would have needed to change their mindset so significantly that it

“would have meant an end to the Sioux way of life just as surely as defeat at the hands of the whites.”[38]

The U.S. Army succeeded because they were more disciplined. Despite horrible conditions, meager provisions, and bad leadership, “Custer got his men to charge because he could threaten them with something worse than the risks of the battlefield if they did not.”[39] Custer had the power of the court-martial—coercive law that could overcome each individual’s preference for “wild freedom” and force soldiers to work toward national goals. He also had the power of cultural norms, common education, and shared experiences that allowed members of the society to “acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act in the way they *have* to act.”[40] In this way, the powerful *outer force* of court-martial was complemented by “*inner compulsion* and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits.”[41]

Ambrose shows us that while the United States often bungled military tactics and lacked the moral imperative, relentless persistence by the more ordered and disciplined force overwhelmed the disorganized and fatally individualistic American Indians.

In his explanation of the tragic decimation of the free American Indians and victorious triumph of the disciplined United States, Ambrose imparts a dramatic lesson for military officers and judge advocates. Even Custer’s death at Little Bighorn shows that when leaders are self-seeking and their forces disorganized, they lose. Nations at war succeed when disciplined character is channeled within a well-ordered fighting force held together by strong compulsive laws that can overcome the most trying of circumstances.

HISTORY – A COMPLICATED LEGACY

History, Ambrose tells us, “is not black or white nor is it propaganda. History is ambiguous, if told honestly.”[42] While doubtlessly true, that ambiguity is where the perspective of the historian shines through. Ambrose counted himself early in his career among the “new left professors who often taught what was wrong with America.”[43] *Crazy Horse and Custer*, however, first published in 1975, often reads more in line with his later goal of “want[ing] to tell all the things that are right about America.”[44] While much of his story feels balanced and he rightly points out the provocation[45] and pretext[46] of the United States’ actions toward the American Indians, many readers will be appalled by his moral equivocation at times.[47]



General George Custer, U.S.A. Civil war photographs, 1861-1865, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Custer himself, whose treatment in American history has fluctuated between sinner and saint, is largely lionized in this account. A self-described “hero worshipper,” Ambrose acknowledges that “Custer rode to the top... over the backs of his fallen soldiers,” and earned his reputation at the price of the “lives of hundreds of men who fell following his flag,”[48] but seems quick to excuse his intolerable selfishness and immutable prejudices as mere quirks and eccentricities of a man in pursuit of greatness.[49]

Finally, despite his worthy contribution to making history accessible to a popular audience, it is important to note that Ambrose came under fire late in his career for alleged plagiarism—presenting other authors’ words as his own without using quotation marks.[50] More seriously, he was accused of grossly exaggerating his relationship with President Dwight Eisenhower and, perhaps, making up interview material he included in his two-volume biography of the president.[51] Rather than the “hundreds and hundreds” of hours he claimed to have spent with Eisenhower, he probably only spent five.[52] While this does not impugn the narrative power of *Crazy Horse and Custer* nor undermine the dramatic lessons available to military officers, it does show that—like his historical subjects—Ambrose was a complex human being and his legacy is complicated.

CONCLUSION

Crazy Horse and Custer is a gripping look at two American legends and the distinct American societies that went to war over the West in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Ambrose shows us that while the United States often bungled military tactics and lacked the moral imperative, relentless persistence by the more ordered and disciplined force overwhelmed the disorganized and fatally individualistic American Indians. In trying to preserve their “wild freedom,” they lost it. This lesson on the need to temper freedom with discipline is worthwhile for every military officer and judge advocate to contemplate.

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EXTERNAL LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Smithsonian Channel:** Where Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse Defeated Colonel Custer (Video 3:58)
- **Khan Academy:** Custer's Last Stand — from the Lakota Perspective (Video 6:06)
- **Britannica.com:** George Armstrong Custer
- **History.com:** 10 Surprising Facts About General Custer
- **History.com:** Crazy Horse
- **History.com:** Indians defeat Custer at Little Big Horn
- **Crazy Horse Memorial**
- **National Park Service:** Little Bighorn National Park

ENDNOTES

- [1] STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, *CRAZY HORSE AND CUSTER: THE PARALLEL LIVES OF TWO AMERICAN WARRIORS* 66 (Anchor Books 1996) (1975).
- [2] Associated Press, Stephen E. Ambrose, Prolific Author and Historian, Dies at 66, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 13, 2002 (quoting Douglas Brinkly), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/13/obituaries/stephen-e-ambrose-prolific-author-and-historian-dies-at-66.html>.
- [3] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at xiii.
- [4] *Id.* at 219.
- [5] *Id.* at 9.
- [6] *Id.* at 122.
- [7] This common saying is attributed in different forms to many different authors, most memorably Winston Churchill.
- [8] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 472.
- [9] *Id.* at 473.
- [10] *Id.* at 390.
- [11] *Id.* at 39.
- [12] *Id.* at 39-40.
- [13] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 49.
- [14] *Id.* at 122.
- [15] *Id.* at 15-16.
- [16] *Id.* at 322.
- [17] *Id.* at 474.
- [18] *Id.* at 474.
- [19] See generally Robert M. Hutchins, Introduction to 1 GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD (Robert M. Hutchins & Mortimer J. Adler, eds., 1952).

- [20] MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, ON THE REPUBLIC (c. 51 B.C.E.), *reprinted in* THE REPUBLIC AND THE LAWS 31 (Jonathan Powell ed., Niall Rudd trans., Oxford Univ. Press 1998).
- [21] IMMANUEL KANT, ETERNAL PEACE: A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY (1795), *reprinted in* ETERNAL PEACE AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ESSAYS 81 (W. Hastie, trans. 1914).
- [22] CICERO, *supra* note 22, at 22.
- [23] KANT, *supra* note 23, at 86.
- [24] George Washington's General Instructions to All the Captains of Companies (Jul. 29, 1757), in 1 THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1748-1757, 470 (Worthington Chauncey Ford ed., G.P. Putnam's Sons 1889).
- [25] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 198.
- [26] *Id.* at 206.
- [27] *Id.* at 116-17, 300.
- [28] *Id.* at 122.
- [29] *Id.* at 122.
- [30] *Id.* at 50.
- [31] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 122.
- [32] *Id.* at 240.
- [33] *Id.* at 220.
- [34] *Id.* at 122.
- [35] *Id.* at 66.
- [36] *Id.* at 67.
- [37] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 66.
- [38] *Id.*
- [39] *Id.* at 206.
- [40] *Id.* at 89, *quoting* Erich Fromm, Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis, in PERSONALITY IN NATURE, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE 409 (Clyde Kluckhohn & Henry A. Murray eds., 1949), *as cited in* David M. Potter, PEOPLE OF PLENTY: ECONOMIC ABUNDANCE AND THE AMERICAN CHARACTER 11 (1954).
- [41] *Id.*
- [42] *Id.* at 324.
- [43] Associated Press, *supra* note 4.
- [44] *Id.*
- [45] AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 322 (“[Y]ou push them, you shove them, you ruin their hunting grounds, you demand more of their territory, until finally they strike back...so that you can say ‘they started it.’”).
- [46] *Id.* at 396 (explaining that after deciding to make war, the United States “then began to look for a *casus belli*. It found its excuse...”).
- [47] *Id.* at 323 (asking “who is to say they were wrong?” about the United States steamrolling the American Indians on the “path of progress” and describing a “well-meant program” that was far from genocide).
- [48] *Id.* at 195.
- [49] *Id.* at 444.
- [50] Michael Nelson, *The Good, the Bad, and the Phony: Six Famous Historians and Their Critics*, 78 VA. Q. REV. (2002), <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/good-bad-and-phony-six-famous-historians-and-their-critics>.
- [51] Russel Goldman, *Did Historian Stephen Ambrose Lie About Interviews with Dwight D. Eisenhower?*, ABC NEWS (Apr. 27, 2010), <http://abcnews.go.com/US/historian-stephen-ambrose-lie-interviews-president-dwight-eisenhower/story?id=10489472>.
- [52] Richard Rayner, *Channelling Ike*, NEW YORKER (Apr. 26, 2010), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/04/26/channelling-ike>.