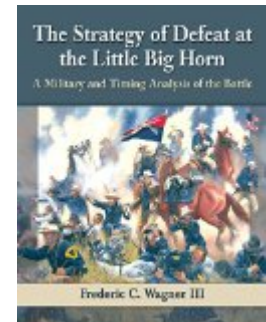


Frederic C. Wagner. *Strategy of Defeat at the Little Big Horn: A Military and Timing Analysis of the Battle.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 296 pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7954-2.



Reviewed by Gregory J. W. Urwin

Published on H-War (June, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Custer's Last Stand continues to endure as one of America's favorite historical mysteries. Ever since Lieutenant James H. Bradley and his Crow scouts discovered the putrefying corpses of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the personnel from five companies of the 7th US Cavalry Regiment on a hogback ridge overlooking the Little Bighorn River on June 27, 1876, numerous soldiers, scholars, and buffs have tried to reconstruct that fight. The result has been a steady succession of theories, some based on sheer speculation and others on wild speculation. Many historians of the battle concluded that the truth about what happened to Custer and the five companies under his immediate command would never be known.

Then, on August 11, 1983, a fire caused by a careless smoker swept across the entirety of Custer's last battlefield, clearing it of grass, yucca, and Big Sage. With the ground exposed, the National Park Service decided to conduct archaeological digs in 1984, 1985, 1989, 1994, 2004, and 2010. These efforts uncovered a large number of

cartridge casings and other artifacts that revealed the location of soldier and Indian firing positions. The archaeological evidence also permitted students of the battle to make more sense of the testimony left by Indian participants. With the application of time-motion studies to this new data mix, a rough consensus emerged regarding what happened to Custer and his doomed command on the afternoon of June 25, 1876.[1]

Frederic C. Wagner III, a former officer in the US Army and New York National Guard, a decorated Vietnam veteran, and a veteran of Wall Street, is the latest in a long line of amateur sleuths to try to decipher exactly what happened at the Little Bighorn.

Wagner's effort does not rest on the discovery of any major new evidence. Instead, he purports to have devised a superior new methodology that permits him to write a dispassionate "military analysis more than a historical recital" (p. 1). Wagner spent five years conducting time-motion studies simulations, and he is satisfied that he has pro-

duced the first book that accurately recounts “the timing of the Custer fight itself” (p. 4). Eschewing the shrill quarrels over clashing personalities that have marred previous histories, Wagner pledges to focus on Custer’s tactical choices rather than to compile a biased catalog of that officer’s mistakes.

Despite that disclaimer, Wagner holds Custer guilty of the cardinal vice of impatience. Rather than scout the farthest reaches of Tullock’s Creek, as instructed by Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, Custer turned his 7th Cavalry west to follow the wide trail left by the hostile Sioux and Cheyenne he was trailing into the Little Bighorn Valley. This decision meant that Custer would bring on a battle before another army column under Terry and Colonel John Gibbon could reach the vicinity of the Indian village to support the aggressive cavalryman and his regiment. Since the army’s main concern that summer was that the Indians would run rather than fight, many historians credit Custer with exercising the discretion that Terry granted him should circumstances warrant it. Wagner, however, insists that Custer’s overpowering desire to strike the foe led him to disobey orders. “Custer’s tactics on June 25 were born of an illegitimate conjugation,” Wagner opines, “and regardless of how sound they might have been on the battlefield it is always with this lack of validity in mind that they need to be considered” (p. 9).

Interestingly, Wagner does not criticize Custer for dividing the 7th Cavalry into four different battalions before he threw his regiment into battle. This arrangement provided him with commendable tactical flexibility. Where he erred was in letting the different components of his regiment get so widely separated that they could not communicate with or support each other. That permitted the Indians to defeat the 7th Cavalry piecemeal.

Aside from the matter of timing, Wagner’s reconstruction of the battle deviates little from what is now the standard narrative. To ensure that the Indians did not slip away to the south, Custer sent

Captain Frederick W. Benteen on an oblique march to the left of the Little Bighorn valley in that direction. Nearly an hour after Benteen departed, an interpreter informed Custer that some Indian warriors had discovered the 7th Cavalry’s presence and were racing off to warn the village on the valley floor. The last thing Custer wanted was for his quarry to scatter, so he ordered Major Marcus A. Reno to take three companies and attack the village head-on. Although Custer had promised to support Reno, he swung north with five companies—three under Captain Myles W. Keogh and two under Captain George W. Yates.

It was at this point that Custer’s plan start to unravel. Intimidated by the large number of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors swarming out of the village Reno halted his attack and tried to hold a defensive position—first on open prairie and then in a belt of timber. Ultimately, Reno ordered a panicked retreat that permitted enemy warriors to inflict crippling losses on his battalion before he and the survivors attained the refuge of a hill on the other side of the Little Bighorn.

Unaware of Reno’s debacle, Custer proceeded north, hoping to hit his enemies from the flank or rear. The unexpected size of the Indian village prompted Custer to send one or more messengers to Captain Benteen for reinforcements. Custer wanted to make use of Benteen’s three companies and the regiment’s reserve ammunition packed on the backs of obstreperous mules so he could deliver a decisive blow. Shortly before Custer’s most urgent summons reached Benteen, the latter encountered Reno’s shattered command. Reno begged Benteen to help him, temporarily immobilizing the captain’s three companies.

Note

[1]. For the most respected of these studies, see John S. Gray, *Custer’s Last Campaign: Mitch-Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); and Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Nar-*

rative of Custer's Defeat (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Gregory J. W. Urwin. Review of Wagner, Frederic C. *Strategy of Defeat at the Little Big Horn: A Military and Timing Analysis of the Battle*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43614>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.