THE LAST STAND

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the similarities and differences between archenemies George Armstrong Custer and Sitting Bull. In what ways can each man be considered a hero or a villain? A success or a failure? Who do you consider to be a better leader and why?

2. In what ways were your preconceived notions about Custer and Sitting Bull altered after reading *The Last Stand*? What accounts had you based your opinions of each man and of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on prior to reading Philbrick’s account?

3. How did both sides use celebrity and the media to their advantage? How did Custer, Sitting Bull, and the supporters of both manipulate their public image? How does this compare with the media manipulation and narrative crafting that occurs with public figures of today?

4. Custer was a polarizing figure, loved by some and hated by others. Why do you think this was the case? How do you think these mixed loyalties affected the battle and its ultimate outcome?

5. Much of Philbrick’s narrative is devoted to the geography of the plains. What challenges and advantages did terrain present in this epic battle?

6. The news of Custer’s defeat came just as America was celebrating the centennial of its birth and was received as a shocking blow. Why was this loss particularly devastating and frightening? How did public sentiment—and public policy—shift as a result? Discuss other disasters throughout history that brought about similar reactions.

7. Philbrick includes an epigraph in *The Last Stand* from William Faulkner, which begins, “Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.” Why do you suppose he included this? How does Faulkner’s notion of the umbilical water-cord apply to the Last Stand?

8. Was the Last Stand avoidable? Why or why not?

9. Philbrick has said it is impossible to understand Custer’s last stand at the Little Bighorn without also taking into account the ultimate showdown between the Indians and the US government 14 years later. Do you agree with this assessment? How does one inform the other?

10. “After four years of research and several trips to the battlefield, I now know that nothing ended at the Little Bighorn,” Philbrick writes in the Preface to *The Last Stand*. What does he mean by this?
11. What do you consider to be the legacy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn? What lessons should we take from it?

12. Philosopher George Santayana once said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In what ways does the Last Stand prove or disprove the notion that history is doomed to repeat itself?