

which endeared him to his superior officers. It was after a successful reconnaissance that General McClellan, whom Custer greatly admired, turned to the young lieutenant and said, “Do you know, you’re just the young man I’ve been looking for, Mr. Custer. How would you like to come on my staff?”<sup>40</sup> He did, and was given a brevet rank of captain.

Their regard for each other was mutual. McClellan said of Custer, “in these days Custer was simply a reckless, gallant boy, undeterred by fatigue, unconscious of fear; but his head always clear in danger and he always brought me clear and intelligible reports of what he saw when under the heaviest fire. I became much attached to him.”<sup>41</sup>

After Lincoln dismissed McClellan, Custer joined the staff of General Alfred Pleasanton, and it was Pleasanton who really sent Custer’s star soaring by recommending the brevet captain for promotion to brigadier general—which promotion was endorsed by Washington, becoming official 29 June 1863—jumping him over captains, majors, and colonels. Custer was twenty-three, the youngest general in the Union army, and with characteristic flair he not only had stars sewn on his collar, but fancied himself up with a crimson tie, a broad-brimmed black hat, and a black velvet jacket that radiated gold braid. No matter that it made him a mark for enemy sharpshooters, Custer thought the men should be able to spot their general in the field. That, with his uniform and his distinctive goldilocks curls and blond moustache, they certainly could.

### ***Custer in Command***

Custer’s command was the second brigade of the third division of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac, consisting of the First, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh regiments of Michigan cavalry and a battery of artillery. These were the men he led into battle at Gettysburg with the cry: “Come on, you Wolverines!”

His first charge at Gettysburg, on 2 July 1863, was repulsed by Wade Hampton’s men. But Custer, whose horse was shot from beneath him, was

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#### The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

cited for gallantry by his commander, Brigadier General Judson “Kill-Cavalry” Kilpatrick. On the next day, the day of Pickett’s charge, Kilpatrick’s men were ordered to shield the flank at Little Round Top. Custer, however, was detached to the command of General David McMurtre Gregg whose men were in place to protect Meade’s rear from Jeb Stuart’s cavalry, the “Invincibles,” who had the same undefeated aura about them as did the infantry of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.

The fighting had already grown hot when Custer was given the orders he wanted, to lead a charge into the enemy. The honor fell to the 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan, Custer’s most inexperienced troops. The blue-coated cavalry charged into Confederate shot and shell and crashed into an intervening fence, which didn’t inhibit hand-to-hand fighting with sabers, pistols, and carbines between Virginians and Michiganders. The Federals were driven back but reformed themselves to meet a Confederate counter-charge. Now at the head of the First Michigan, his best regiment, Custer thrust his sword in the air and shouted, “Come on, you Wolverines!” The clashing opponents collided with such fury that horses tumbled over each other—and this time, though the gun smoke, the point-blank discharges, and the clanging, bloodied sabers, it was the Confederates who pulled back. The invincible Virginians had been stopped. “I challenge the annals of warfare to produce a more brilliant or successful charge of cavalry,”<sup>42</sup> wrote Custer in his official report. This wasn’t bragging—though Custer was often, wrongly, accused of that—it was boyish enthusiasm.

Indeed, the key to understanding Custer is that he pursued all his endeavors with boyish ardor, spirit, and pluck. He was tough, of course. He was proud of being able to endure any hardship. But he also thrived on action. He rejoiced in the field (and later on the Great Plains) surrounded by fast horses, good dogs (dogs recognized him as one of their natural masters), a variety of other animals (such as a pet field mouse), and an assortment of hangers-on, including, during the war, a runaway slave named Eliza who became his cook (she said she wanted to try “this

freedom business”), a ragamuffin boy servant named Johnnie Cisco and another named Joseph Fought, who repeatedly deserted his own unit to be with Custer. Later in the war, Michigan troops petitioned *en masse* to serve under the golden-haired general.

Custer maneuvered friends and family onto his staff or into his units, including his brother Tom. And if it was cronyism it was cronyism that rewarded the brave, for all the Custers were gallant. His brother Tom won the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery at Saylor’s Creek (he was shot in the face, and survived to fight again).

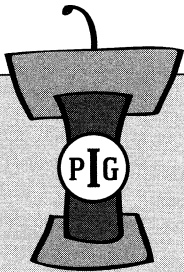
A lot of people wanted to be with Custer. That included his bride, Elizabeth “Libbie” Bacon, whom Custer married in February 1864 after her father, Judge Daniel Bacon, could no longer keep the Boy General from his daughter. The Custers were the Bacon’s social inferiors, and Custer had a reputation as a ladies man. But, well, at least that ringleted fellow was a general, and not a blacksmith. And if Judge Bacon had strong doubts before the marriage, he should by rights have quickly buried them (though apparently he never did), for few couples in history seem to have been happier than Libbie and Armstrong.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, his charming, well-bred, pious wife followed her vibrant enthusiast of a husband to camp whenever it was considered safe to do so. And on one occasion, after the war, while on the Great Plains, he was court-martialed and suspended from duty for a year, because he decided to swing by and visit his wife while on a campaign.

Jeb Stuart kept his wife away from camp, thinking it no place for a lady. Custer welcomed his wife, and thought Stuart’s flirtations with other women along the campaign trail was no behavior for a husband. But

### Son of the Morning Star

“I left home when but sixteen, and have been surrounded by temptation, but I have always had a purpose in life.”

**Custer to his future father-in-law**



then again, Stuart employed his banjo players for evening entertainments of dancing and singing, and it seemed only right and proper to that cavalier that ladies be invited. Custer kept a band too—but he used it to for purely martial purposes: to inspire the men, to prepare a charge. There’s something admirable about the Custer way.

*Phil Sheridan’s Golden Boy*

In March 1864, Custer fell under the command of Phil Sheridan. Sheridan learned to like the cut of Custer’s jib—a man as eager to fight the enemy as he was. As an aide to General Meade noted, “fighting for fun is rare . . . [only] such men as . . . Custer and some others, attacked whenever they got a chance, and of their own accord.” And it gained him a reputation. When Libbie was introduced to President Lincoln in Washington, old Abe replied, “So this is the young woman whose husband goes into a charge with a whoop and a shout.”<sup>44</sup>

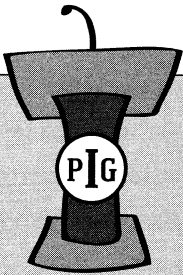
Custer whooped and shouted his way through the Battle of the Wilderness, Trevilian Station, Yellow Tavern (where Stuart was struck down), the Shenandoah Valley,<sup>45</sup> and the final campaign at Appomattox. Custer’s star rose ever higher, as he closed out the war a major general of volun-

The Custers of Camelot

“There was a bright and joyous chivalry in that man [Custer], and a noble refinement mingled with constant gaiety in the wife [Libbie], such as I fear is passing from the earth.”

Journalist Charles Godfrey Leland on the Custers after the war

Quoted in Jay Monaghan, *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer* (University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 283.



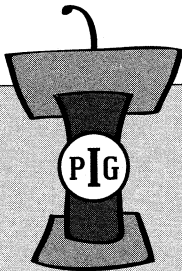
teers and a brevet major general in the regular army. Not bad for a twenty-five-year-old.

Custer was a magnanimous victor. He liked the South and Southern-ers. Yes he had defeated them, and in his mind they deserved to be defeated, but he did not believe they should be abused and trampled upon simply because the Federal government now had the power to do so. He had his band play Dixie after he captured worn out grey troopers near the end of the war, and he became a political ally of President Andrew Johnson against the Radical Republicans. Already marked down as a McClellan man and a Democrat, Custer was winning himself political enemies.

But Sheridan was able to keep Custer gainfully employed, bringing him to Texas. That assignment, however, proved temporary, despite Sheridan's best efforts. The War Department reduced Custer in rank to captain and assigned him to the 5th Cavalry. Custer wanted to find something better. Grant wrote a letter of recommendation for him to become a mercenary general in the Mexican army, but Custer's application for leave was denied. Still, Custer hoped something would turn up—and it did, a lieutenant colonelcy in the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, which at least had the promise of adventure, as the 7<sup>th</sup> was posted on the Great Plains.

Into the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry would come his brothers, Tom and Boston, a nephew, Autie Reed, and a brother-in-law, as well as such men as Captain Myles Keough, who had fought for the pope in Italy, Lieutenant

**A Little Table  
for a Little Lady**



“My dear Madam—I respectfully present to you the small writing-table on which the conditions of the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia were written by Lt. General Grant—and permit me to say, Madam, that there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring this about than your very gallant husband.”

**Phil Sheridan to  
Libbie Custer**

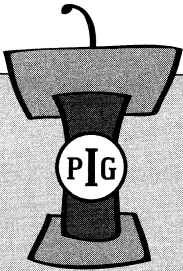
Quoted in Jay Monaghan, *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer*, 246.

### Reconstruction = Simple Destruction

"I believe that every man who voluntarily engaged in the Rebellion forfeited every right held under our government—to live, hold property. But . . . for the Government to exact full penalties, simply because it is constitutionally authorized to do so, would, in my opinion, be unnecessary, impolitic, inhuman, and wholly at variance with the principles of a free, civilized and Christian nation, such as we profess to be."

#### Custer on the policy of Reconstruction

Quoted in Marguerite Merrington, *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General George A. Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* (Devin-Adair, 1950), 187-8.



Charles DeRudio, who had fought against the pope as an Italian nationalist, and Captain Louis Hamilton, the grandson of Alexander Hamilton. He was surrounded by friends, but also by a few enemies like Captain Frederick Benteen and Major Marcus Reno.

Sheridan took no nonsense from Indians, and he set Custer out to destroy any hostiles. Sheridan's Indian policy was harsh, but to his mind, realistic: "The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next year for the more I see of these Indians the more I am convinced that they will all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers."<sup>46</sup> Custer executed this policy—and he saw the barbarities that justified it: the child rapes and murders of abducted white girls by the Indians, the disemboweling of white boys, the perfidy of Indian promises (not so very different from the cliché of broken government promises to the Indians). And, like Sheridan, he saw the Indian Bureau as corrupt. Unlike Sheridan, he said so in ways that made him an enemy of General Grant, whose Indian policy was more conciliatory than was Sherman's or Sheridan's.

The romantic in Custer—and there was very little of anything else—relished living and fighting amongst the Indians. He was, if anything, sympathetic to their plight. He conceded that they were savage—and the New England pantywaists who called them noble savages had no idea what they were talking about—but he believed they could be civilized, Christianized, and he repudiated any talk of exterminating the Indians. He went further, stating, “If I were an Indian, I often think that I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people who adhered to the free open plains, rather than to submit to the confined limits of a reservation, there to be the recipient of the blessed benefits of civilization, with its vices thrown in without stint or measure.”<sup>47</sup> The modern stereotype of Custer as a crazed Indian-killer is a coarse, blatant slander. The old image, of Custer as a hero, is a simple truth (and one enunciated by former Confederates, like Joseph E. Johnston).

The Battle of the Little Big Horn, Custer’s Last Stand, is the crown of thorns of the Custer legend. What actually happened at the battle must also be, in some measure, a matter of mystery and conjecture. But one thing can be said with certainty: the dash and bravery, the willingness to take risks, his belief that disciplined cavalry could defeat Indian numbers greater than their own, all of which had served him so well in the past, deserted him here. It is very likely that the image of Custer being among the last to die, if not the very last to fall on what is now Custer’s Hill, is a true one. And with his death, as the journalist foretold, a paragon of a “bright and joyous chivalry” passed from the earth.

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**Part V**



**BEATING RETREAT**

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# WHAT IF THE SOUTH HAD WON?

So just suppose that Abraham Lincoln had let the South go. What if he had said:

We part as friends. We hope to reunite as friends. There will be no coercion of the Southern states by the people of the North. No state shall be kept in the Union against its will. Such a turn of events would be contrary to every principle of free government that we cherish. But we ask the Southern states, to which we are bound by mystic chords of memory and affection, that they reconsider their action. If not now, then later, when the heat of anger has subsided, when they have seen the actions of this administration work only for the good of the whole and not for the partisan designs of a few; when this administration shows by word and deed that it is happy to live within the confines of the Constitution, that we will admit of no interference in the established institutions of the several states. I trust that by our demeanor, by our character, by our actions, by our prosperity and our progress we will prove to our separated brethren that we should again be more than neighbors, we should be more than friends, we should in fact be united states, for a house

## Guess What?

- ✦ If there had been no Civil War, the South would have abolished slavery peaceably (as every other country in the Western Hemisphere did in the nineteenth century)
- ✦ The Confederate States of America might have helped the Allies win World War I sooner
- ✦ If the South had won the war, Cuba would be a state of the re-United States

united is far stronger, will be far more prosperous, and will be far happier, than a house divided, a house rent asunder by rancor, a house that undermines its very foundations by separation.



**Books Yankees Don't Want You to Read**

*The Glittering Illusion: English Sympathy for the Southern Confederacy*, by Sheldon Vanauken (Regnery, 1989).

Better known as a friend of C.S. Lewis and as the author of the memoir *A Severe Mercy*, this book by the Anglophile Virginian and Catholic-convert Sheldon Vanauken is an excellent, brief, and highly readable study of why educated, liberty-loving English gentlemen sided with the Confederacy. His fantasia on the South winning the War through British intervention is a terrific little capstone to the book. (In the fantasia, the South becomes part of the British Empire, Lee becomes Lord Arlington, and Lincoln retires to Maine and writes, *An Apology for My Administration*.)

To the people of Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and Arkansas, I have a special message. I tell you that this government will raise no arms against the states of the Southern Confederacy. We will wage no war of subjugation against these states. And I confirm, yet again, that I have neither the right, nor the power, nor the desire to abolish slavery within these states or any other where it is lawfully established. What I do desire, as do all the Northern states, is that we be once again a nation united in peace, amity, and common government. Let us through prayer and good graces work to achieve that end. I ask that all good men of the United States, and those now separated from us, work peaceably to achieve the reconciliation that is our destiny and our hope. Four score years ago we created a new nation, united in principle. I pray that sharing the same

God, the same continent, and the same destiny, we might unite again in common principle and common government.

Had Lincoln given that speech would “government of the people, by the people, and for the people have perished from the earth”? No, it would

have been confirmed, as the Southern states would have enjoyed that very thing and not have been brutalized into accepting a government that they did not want and that did not represent their interests. Would slavery have persisted until this very day? No, it seems certain it would have been abolished peaceably, as it found itself abolished everywhere else in the New World in the nineteenth century. Imagine that there had been no war against the South, and subsequently no Reconstruction putting the South under martial law, disenfranchising white voters with Confederate pasts, and enfranchising newly freed slaves as wards of the Republican Party. Without that past, race relations in the South would have been better, not worse, and the paternalist planters would have arranged, over time, to emancipate their slaves in exchange for financial compensation.

### **Sorry to break the news to you, but Southern Democrats aren't Nazis**

It is sometimes said today—among the politically correct, with their cartoonish views of history—that Lee was the equivalent of Rommel in a Confederacy that was the equivalent of the Third Reich . . . though the South, of course, waged no aggressive war, committed no Holocaust against the Jews—in fact, included the Jewish Judah P. Benjamin as its, in succession, secretary of state, secretary of war, and attorney general, the first Jewish cabinet officer in North America—and had as its governing ideology states' rights and an even more limited federal government than the United States. Pretty fascist, huh?

The comparison, to anyone with an ounce of sense, or historical imagination, is risible. Far from being sympathetic to National Socialism, the antebellum South was more wedded to economic and governmental libertarianism (no tariffs, no taxpayer-funded “internal improvements,” no overweening national government trampling on states' rights) than was the North. The Confederate Constitution limited the president to one six-year

term. There was no Holocaust in the South, or anything remotely like it. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were slave-owners and so was Jefferson Davis, and Davis was no more evil than they were. In fact, he saw himself, in many ways, as their inheritor. Thomas Jefferson's grandson died

fighting for the Confederacy. John Marshall's grandson was on Lee's staff. Relatives of Washington, Patrick Henry, and other Virginia patriots, lined up with the Confederacy. So did the grandson of the author of the "Star-Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key.

Southern ideas were about as far from National Socialist ideas as can be imagined. The South had little truck with nationalism (as opposed to federalism and state loyalties) and "progressive ideas" (like Marxism). Its people insisted on their liberty to a degree that not even the Federal government could tolerate. If they would not take orders from Abraham Lincoln, and often wondered why they should take them from Jefferson Davis, it is hard to imagine they would have had any interest in being harangued by a paper-hanging corporal with a toothbrush moustache.

There would have been—and were—no more ardent anti-Nazis than the people of the South. As the historian Samuel Eliot Morrison noted, writing of the 1940 election between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Wendell Wilkie, though Southerners dis-

trusted the New Deal, "the South in general, with its gallant tradition, applauded the President's determination to help the Allies; and ahead of



### Books Yankees Don't Want You to Read

*If the South Had Won the Civil War*, by MacKinlay Kantor (Forge, 2001).

By the author of the novel *Andersonville*, this "counterfactual" was a sensation when it was first published in *Look* magazine in 1960. Cleverly done, with some interesting implications of a Southern victory and Union defeat (for instance, Secretary of State William Seward lacks the political capital to buy Alaska, leaving it a Russian outpost in North America, which later heightens Cold War tensions), Kantor envisions the peaceful end of slavery in the South and the inevitable reunion of the three Republics—Southern, Northern, and Texas. This illustrated edition has rather nifty artist's renditions of doughboys and G.I.s with Texan, Confederate, and Federal insignia, fighting side by side.

any other part of the country, prepared mentally for the war that the nation had to fight.”<sup>1</sup> The America First movement—which strove to keep America out of any European war—was most popular in the Midwest and among the descendants of Irish and German immigrants, many of whom had earned their citizenship fighting for Abraham Lincoln.

If the South had won the war, its natural ally would have been Britain, through ties of trade and culture. Sheldon Vanauken, in his imagining of a Confederate victory at the close of his book *The Glittering Illusion: English Sympathy for the Southern Confederacy*, actually saw the Confederacy becoming part of the British Empire, with the result that rather than entering the Great War in the rather dilatory fashion arranged by the schoolmasterish President Woodrow Wilson, Southern regiments charged in from the start, ensuring an Allied victory in 1916 rather than 1918. In MacKinlay Kantor’s classic rendering of Confederate victory, *If the South Had Won the War*, North and South eventually reunite, in large part because of common service on the side of Britain in both World Wars.

### Confederate Cuba? *Si!*

If the South had won, would the Plains Indians still be running free? Some like to imagine so. Certainly, the South had Indian allies, the most famous being the Cherokee Brigadier General Stand Watie, but so did the North. Still, some folks of a peculiar ideological stripe (paleo-libertarians, they’re likely to be called) would have you think that if the South had won the War, Indians and Confederates would have rubbed along amicably ever after: the Indians hunting buffalo on the plains; Confederate statesmen elucidating the finer points of *laissez-faire*.

For folks of this ilk, Lincoln fought to create an American Empire that moved from subjugating the South, to threatening the Emperor Maximilian’s Mexico, to exterminating the Indians, to conquering the Philippines. But the idea that the South was not “imperialist,” by this definition, is

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#### The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

absurd. Thomas Jefferson, one of the idols of the paleo-libertarian school, was the president who called America “an empire of liberty.” He believed in “manifest destiny” before the term was invented. (He also believed that the United States should invade and conquer Canada.) It wasn’t Northerners who annexed Florida, it was Andrew Jackson who said he’d be happy to take Cuba next (and who was no small shakes as an Indian fighter either). It wasn’t Northerners who tore Texas from Mexico; and it was Southern boys who were most ardent for the Mexican War and a Southern president, James K. Polk, who said that thanks to the Treaty of Hidalgo, ending that war, “there will be added to the United States an immense empire, the value of which twenty years hence it would be difficult to calculate.”<sup>2</sup>

It was Southerners, too, who had dreams of a cotton kingdom extending into Latin America, and Southern politicians (like Secretary of War Jefferson Davis and Mississippi Governor John A. Quitman) who supported American “filibusters,” like the Tennessean William Walker, who looked to carve out little empires in Baja California or Nicaragua. In fact, if one imagines that the South had won the war, it’s a near certainty that the South would have annexed Cuba, a long held Southern dream. And think of the implications of that: no Cuban missile crisis, another Southern beach spot for Yankee snow birds, no shortage of Cuban cigars.

In fact, if the South had won—we all would have had it made, to quote a Southern partisan. But while it’s fun to imagine, there’s not much point in thinking about what didn’t happen. Southerners are conservatives, and conservatives are realists. As much as Lee and Longstreet, Davis and Hampton, we need to find our war in post-bellum America.

And if the Old South had its charms and grace and merit, it would be churlish—not to say idiotic—not to count the many blessings we have as citizens of the United States. We should cherish what we have in the Southern tradition. We should enjoy the unity we have as united states, even if we had rather that unity had been reached without the terrors and



What if the South Had Won?

brutalities and injustices of the War and Reconstruction. And we should remember that men like Lee and Jackson, Stuart and Hill, while Southern heroes, should be American heroes as well. We're all in this together.

*Deo Vindice.*

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