



## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Presents *Custer's Last Stand*

*New Two-Hour Documentary Explores the Life of  
One of the Most Controversial and Mythic Figures in American History*

Premieres Tuesday, January 17, 2012  
8:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m. ET on PBS



America had just finished celebrating its 100th birthday, when, on July 6, 1876, the telegraph brought word that General George Armstrong Custer and 261 members of his Seventh Cavalry column had been massacred by Cheyenne and Lakota warriors along the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory. The news was greeted with stunned disbelief. How could Custer, the “boy general” of the Civil War, America’s most celebrated Indian fighter, the avatar of western expansion, have been struck down by a group of warriors armed with little more than bows and arrows? Like everything else about Custer, his martyrdom was shrouded in controversy and contradictions, and the final act of his larger-than-life career was played out on a grand stage with a spellbound public engrossed in the drama. In the end, his death would launch one of the greatest myths in American history.

*Custer's Last Stand*, a new two-hour biography of one of the most celebrated and controversial icons of nineteenth-century America, paints a penetrating psychological portrait of Custer’s charismatic, narcissistic personality, and for the first time on television, explores the fateful relationships within the officers of the Seventh Cavalry that would lead him to his doom. This new biography allows viewers to take a fresh look at Custer’s passionate love affair with his wife Libbie, and their mutually ambitious partnership that made them the power couple of the 1870s. From Custer’s heroic exploits on the battlefields of the Civil War, to his often brutal subjugation of the Indians of the Southern Plains, to his highly publicized expedition into the Black Hills, Custer was a man in a hurry, desperately trying to “be” Custer, struggling to maintain the fame that had come to define him.

Directed by Stephen Ives (*Seabiscuit*, *The West*, *Panama Canal*), *Custer's Last Stand* will premiere on the PBS series AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on Tuesday, January 17, 2012 at 8:00 p.m. ET (check local listings), part of a month-long salute to the West that also includes the premiere of *Billy the Kid* (January 10) and rebroadcasts of *Wyatt Earp*, *Geronimo*, *Annie Oakley* and *Jesse James*.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL. MAJOR FUNDING IS PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION. ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR CUSTER'S LAST STAND IS PROVIDED BY DOCUMENTARY INVESTMENT GROUP MEMBERS: NORDBLOM FAMILY FOUNDATION AND RICK AND NONNIE BURNES, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING, AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.



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The son of an Ohio blacksmith, George Armstrong Custer was determined to transcend his lowly origins by earning a coveted spot at West Point. Always rebellious and a risk-taker, Custer graduated with a record of infractions never before equaled in the history of the academy. Fresh out of West Point when the Civil War began, Custer quickly proved more than ready for command, distinguishing himself in a series of dashing cavalry charges (including the decisive Battle of Gettysburg) that put him on the front page of *Harper's Weekly*. He became known as the “boy general.”

At his side, often in a tent near the front lines, was the love of his life, Elizabeth Bacon Custer. They had met in the small town of Monroe, Michigan, and from the outset, shared a passion and ambition for greatness. Always more politically adept and diplomatic than her husband, Libbie provided the perfect complement to her often brash and overbearing spouse. Unlike many army wives at the time, Elizabeth was determined to accompany her husband to even the most remote and dangerous posts, and she was at his side when Custer joined the Seventh Cavalry, a new regiment being mustered out to the Southern Plains of Kansas and Oklahoma.

It was 1866 and the western frontier was awash in conflict. As railroads continued to push further west and new waves of settlers followed, clashes with Indians intensified. Unaccustomed to the tactics of the Cheyenne and Arapaho, Custer spent months fruitlessly chasing after elusive bands of warriors. At one point, he became so frustrated that he abandoned his command and dashed 150 miles in 55 hours just to spend one day with his wife. He was court-martialed, suspended from the service and denied pay for a year. Custer's salvation would come from General Philip Sheridan, who recalled him and asked him to lead a daring new winter campaign against the Cheyenne. In a bloody dawn attack along the Washita River in 1868, Custer and his men killed 103 Indians — a few warriors, but mostly women, children and old men. Now dressed in buckskins, Custer was hailed as the nation's finest Indian fighter. He had managed to resurrect his career from the depths of disgrace and reinvent himself as a new hero of the American frontier.

Custer's heroics on the Southern Plains masked a complicated relationship with native people. As Nathaniel Philbrick, author of *The Last Stand*, says, “[Custer] identified with them very strongly, prided himself on knowledge of their rituals and lifestyle. But, on the other hand, he's part of white civilization and saw them as a primitive race that was going to eventually melt into the shadows.”

Custer was again given a chance for glory in 1874, this time leading a survey expedition into the Black Hills. By the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty, this striking oasis in the middle of the Northern Plains had been guaranteed to the Sioux forever and was considered by the tribe to be their most sacred ground. Sheridan hoped Custer's provocative foray into the Black Hills would spark a new Indian war and push “hostile” bands, led by the defiant chief Sitting Bull, back onto the reservations. But there were no conflicts with Indians, and Custer turned the expedition into a stage for himself, scouting the trail, writing reports for

the army and articles for newspapers back East, collecting specimens, and writing his Civil War memoirs. But in the summer of 1876, Custer's journey into the Black Hills, what the Lakota had dubbed "The Thieves Road," became a rallying cry as thousands of Indians left the reservations and joined Sitting Bull along the tributaries of the Upper Yellowstone River. Sheridan sent Custer, under General Alfred Terry, to subdue Sitting Bull and his people once and for all.

Riding with Custer on the expedition were his two senior officers, Major Marcus Reno, a brooding melancholic with a taste for whiskey, and Captain Frederick Benteen, a dyspeptic veteran of the Plains Wars who harbored a grudge against Custer for his actions at the Washita. The tortured relationship between these two men would prove decisive in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The battle, on June 25 - 26, 1876, would actually be three battles: Reno's ill-fated charge into Sitting Bull's village; his ragged retreat to the bluffs where he and Benteen would hold off thousands of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors for almost 36 hours; and Custer's Last Stand, which would be forever cloaked in mystery — a chaotic and confused scene that to this day remains a subject of controversy and debate.

No sooner had the news of Custer's massacre reached Philadelphia than the mythmaking began. It would be Libbie Custer who would do more than anyone to shape the legend of her husband. In a series of bestselling books, the faithful widow extolled Custer's heroic virtues and dauntless courage, and she kept it up until she died in 1933. Future decades would ceaselessly re-interpret the meaning of the Custer myth, each generation seemingly adapting his story to suit the needs of their own time. For Americans during World War II, Custer served to rally a nation engaged in a fight for its survival against totalitarianism. In the Vietnam era, Custer would be seen as a symbol of American arrogance and violent imperialism.

Says historian Michael A. Elliott, "Custer is controversial for the same reasons he was so successful in his own time. He was an outsized personality who used the tools around him to shape himself into a public figure that embodies many of the things that make us uncomfortable about American history — the way that Americans sometimes rush into a military action, the way that America has treated American Indians and other peoples now around the world. These are questions that are really raw and nagging and we haven't resolved them. And until we do we're going to keep returning to Custer and the controversies that surround him." Adds AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Executive Producer Mark Samels, "Custer is a remarkable individual. Love him or hate him, you can't take your eyes off him."

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### **The Participants, in order of appearance**

**Nathaniel Philbrick** is the author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*.

**Richard Slotkin** is a cultural critic and the Olin Professor of English and American Studies at Wesleyan University.

**Louis Warren** is a professor of Western U.S. History at the University of California, Davis.

**Michael A. Elliott** is a professor of English at Emory University and the author of *Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer*.

**Edward Linenthal** is a professor of history at Indiana University.

**Gerard Baker** is the former superintendent, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

**Paul A. Hutton** is a professor of history at the University of New Mexico and the editor of *The Custer Reader*.

**Louise Barnett** is a professor of American Studies at Rutgers University and the author of *Touched by Fire: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of George Armstrong Custer*.

**Shirley Leckie Reed** is a professor of history at the University of Central Florida and the author of *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth*.

**Philip J. Deloria** is a professor of history at the University of Michigan.

## About the Filmmakers

Written and Directed by	Stephen Ives
Produced by	Amanda Pollak
Edited by	Howard Sharp
Associate Producer	Lauren DeFilippo
Director of Photography	Andrew Young
Music by	Peter Rundquist
Narrated by	Michael Murphy

**STEPHEN IVES (Producer/Director)** In his twenty years of work in public television, Stephen Ives has established himself as one of the nation's leading independent documentary directors. His landmark series *The West* was seen by more than 38 million people nationwide during its national premiere in the fall of 1996, making it one of the most-watched PBS programs of all time. Caryn James of *The New York Times* wrote that *The West* was “fiercely and brilliantly rooted in fact,” and *The New York Daily News* called the programs a “breathtakingly beautiful series of films...that make riveting TV.” Ives’s *Lindbergh*, a portrait of the reluctant American hero Charles A. Lindbergh, premiered in the third season of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on PBS in 1990. In 1987, Ives began a decade-long collaboration with filmmaker Ken Burns, as a co-producer of a history of the United States Congress, and as a consulting producer on the groundbreaking series, *The Civil War* and *Baseball*.

After the premiere of *The West*, Ives turned his attention towards contemporary films, producing a profile of the innovative Cornerstone Theater Company, which aired on HBO in the fall of 1999, and *Amato: A Love Affair with Opera*, a portrait of the world’s smallest opera company which aired on PBS in 2001 and earned Ives a nomination from the Directors Guild of America for Outstanding Directorial Achievement.

His profile of the 1930s thoroughbred Seabiscuit, which aired on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE in April 2003, won a Primetime Emmy award. His PBS series, *Reporting America at War*, about American war correspondents, was described by *The Los Angeles Times* as “television that matters...a visual document of power and clarity.” Since 2003, he has directed seven films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: *Seabiscuit*, *Las Vegas*, *New Orleans*, *Kit Carson*, *Roads to Memphis*, *Panama Canal* and the upcoming *Grand Coulee Dam*.

**MARK SAMELS (Executive Producer)** Under Samels' leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Samels also serves on the Board of Governors at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. A native of Wisconsin, he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### **About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 14 George Foster Peabody Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and 30 Emmy Awards, including, most recently, *Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Filmmaking* for *Freedom Riders*.

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### **Publicity Contacts:**

CaraMar Publicity

Mary Lugo 770-623-8190

Cara White 843-881-1480

Abbe Harris 908-233-7990

lugo@negia.net

cara.white@mac.com

abbe@caramar.net