

The single quotation marks enclose a part of a sentence from Custer's "My Life on the Plains," the rest of which continues "which had the effect to tumble him over in the snow, when I was enabled to despatch him with my pistol." Moreover, the forepart of the same sentence explains that the action was taken, "Fearing for the safety of my dogs, which were being trampled in the snow by the buffalo." As Van de Water makes much use of hunting and dog incidents to display what he conceives as Custer's cruelty, the obvious unfairness of this partial quotation is sufficient to condemn his book as special pleading for the prosecution.

Perhaps one of the keys to Custer's character was his interest in hunting, in horses and dogs, and perhaps he was more interested in hunting buffalo, elk and grizzly bears than he was in hunting the scant glory that might be won in Indian wars. Another key to his character was his boyishness - the "boy general" - his failure to "grow up", his continued indulgence of practical jokes at the expense of friends and mere acquaintances.

He was, in short, a complete extrovert. (Dr. Cutter bears me out in this.) He was a "show-off," he wore eccentric uniforms in bright colors, he sought the lime-light. Nevertheless, there was merit in the man. A military career appealed to him from an early age and his appointment to West Point was won more by persistence than by favor. He took little interest in studies there, but much in extra-curricular activities. In the Civil War his first staff appointment came merely because he was the junior in a company that had its full complement of three officers. His courage and dash were noted by McClellan, and he served as captain on that general's staff. When McClellan was relieved, Custer remained with him to assist in writing McClellan's final report. His loyalty to McClellan, who was completely out of favor, is a point in Custer's favor. Again in the field, his courageous conduct in a charge at Aldie resulted in his appointment as brigadier general under Pleasanton, who was looking for young officers to give the cavalry the leadership it needed - Kilpatrick, Merritt, and Farnsworth were named at the same time. So little did this promotion depend on favor, that Custer had actually been turned down when seeking to be colonel of one of the Michigan regiments now assigned to his brigade.

He distinguished himself at Gettysburg, and in Sheridan's valley campaigns. Sheridan used him when he wanted speed and dash, and in this sort of leadership Custer excelled. But Whittaker, who served in these campaigns, denied that Custer was reckless. He points out that Custer led his troops from the front lines, where he could see the situation and could take quick advantage of opportunities. Sheridan continued to rely on Custer in his Indian campaigns, and even intervened to cut short a court martial sentence so Custer would be available for the campaign that resulted in the Battle of the Washita.

Coming to the Little Big Horn campaign, Maj. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, an able officer but little experienced with the Indians, also relied upon Custer. He at first designated Custer to lead the 1876 expedition. Meanwhile Custer had incensed President Grant by going to Washington to testify against Secretary Belknap in the scandals involving army canteens or sutlers' stores - and apparently all Custer knew about it was hearsay. Grant refused to allow Custer to go on the expedition until Terry interceded, then permitted him to go only in command of his own regiment, the 7th Cavalry.

The much disputed order issued by Terry on the eve of the Little Big Horn allowed so much discretion that it seems highly doubtful that any court martial would have found Custer guilty of disobeying it. Much stress is laid on the forced marches, but marches of 28 and 33 miles in successive days do not seem excessive for cavalry. (Merritt's 5th Cavalry made 85 miles in one march during the same summer). Custer's conduct seems predicated on a fear that the Indians would escape - the best justification for which seems to be that they actually had escaped by the time Terry's and Gibbon's columns arrived. Note also that later in the campaign when Terry and Crook closed their trap, the Indians had slipped out from between them and never were located until Crook stumbled upon them at Slim Buttes.

Custer's primary fault in his conduct of the fight was lack of reconnaissance. He apparently knew nothing of the ground, and nothing of the exact location of the Indian village. This undoubtedly accounts for the fact that Benteen was sent in a direction where the valleys led away from the scene of battle, putting him quite