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guest commentary

Little Bighorn memorial a mixed symbol at best

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Sunday, April 20, 2003 - It took 127 years, but the Indians who died defending home and family from George Armstrong Custer are getting a memorial.

One hundred twenty-two years have passed since the invading 7th Cavalry was given a monument on Montana's Little Bighorn, 78 since Indians asked for a monument of their own, 12 since Congress okayed it (provided that natives, poorest of America's poor, funded it), and two since Congress was shamed into a trifling disbursement.

Even that pittance came with a leash, as Indians were ordered to find a design that would "appeal to all citizens," be "solely commemorative" (as opposed to interpretive), and not overshadow the Custer memorial. In plain English, Washington didn't want anything too pro-Indian.

Heaven forbid. Custer's mission, after all, was to destroy Indians who had the audacity to hold the U.S. to its word, that word being the 1868 treaty guaranteeing them a large swath of the High Plains. In 1874 Custer broke the treaty by reconnoitering the Black Hills for gold. Finding it, he was ordered to break the treaty again, forcing tribes onto reservations and killing resisters - old and young, man and woman.

Custer gleefully accepted the charge. He expected to repeat his 1868 massacre of defenseless Cheyennes on Oklahoma's Washita River, for which he had been heaped with medals. The Cheyennes' crime: peacefully wintering on land that was promised them.

That and related history make a "judgment-free" memorial at Little Bighorn seem as fair as a judgment-free memorial at Ground Zero or Pearl Harbor.

It's worth noting that there's nothing wrong with the memorial as art: A bermed circle rises naturally from the rolling hills and opens onto sculptures of wispy horsemen of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes.

Even half-built, the interior is peaceful, contemplative. But it is utterly ahistorical; no Vietnam War Memorial, this.

To Indians this poses a cruel dilemma: Condemn the monument as a crumb from master's table, or praise it as a small step toward greater change? Congress's lone Indian, Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-Colo.), personifies this devil's choice. In 1991 Campbell, then a Democratic congressman, co-sponsored a law that stripped Custer's name from the site and rechristened it Little Bighorn Battlefield. The law also authorized the Indian monument, which Campbell later worked to fund. For such, many esteem him.

And yet Campbell has taken pains to assure right-leaning constituents his is a minimal Indian agenda. In the Columbian year of 1992, while other Native Americans protested 500 years of abuse, Campbell rode in a parade with Columbus's descendant. In 2000, after tribes spent \$750,000 to unseat vitriolic Indian-hunter Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), Campbell wanted to put the ex-senator on the federal bench. Apoplectic tribes quashed the move, but Campbell's bona fides as a "moderate Indian" were secure.

It's therefore not surprising that Campbell endorsed the "inclusive" memorial. The battle, he said, was the "inevitable and tragic clash of two cultures at the end of an era" - not the bitter fruit of a well-documented policy of ethnic cleansing. Of Custer and his troops: "Americans should hold these men in esteem, for they all believed in what they fought for, and they all made the ultimate sacrifice for their respective cause."

Only a few months before, Campbell had said nearly the opposite. He called the massacre of Indians on Colorado's Sand Creek "one of the most shameful events in our nation's history," an act of "inhumanity and cowardice" shrouded in "years of denial and dishonor." Sand Creek and Little Bighorn were born of the same policy, but few constituents know Sand Creek, and no American icons were offed there. It's safer to condemn.

Indians will recognize within Campbell the old fight between "agency Indians" and "traditional Indians." Agency Indians cooperated with government and church, for which they were rewarded with good rations, land and jobs. Traditionals resisted and were relegated to a poverty that haunts them still. Whites fed the discord to better swindle broken tribes of land.

Only in the last decades have a precious few Indians held to traditional ways and wielded economic and political power. But confronted with the likes of child mortality at Third World levels or a timid monument, the bulk of this tiny vanguard has little choice but to battle the former.

And so visitors to the Indian memorial will be left to the interpretation of the Park Service, which is so slanted the Little Bighorn Museum claims Custer's invasion of the Black Hills was legal. Already the Park Service is telling us how healing the memorial is.

Truly is history written by the winner.

Stephen Hendricks is writing a book about Native survival in an indifferent America.