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Leviathan 2.0:
Inventing Modern Statehood

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Introduction

START perhaps in the foothills of southern Montana on a summer day almost a century and a half ago—not a long time really, indeed in the very year that my grandfather was born in a densely settled neighborhood of Central Europe five thousand miles to the East. The United States Army has deployed about seven hundred cavalry against an alliance of Lakota, Arapaho, and Cheyenne communities concluded the year before under the leadership of Chief Sitting Bull, after white miners, beckoned by reports of gold discoveries in the Black Hills of South Dakota, had streamed into lands allocated to the Indians by treaty in 1868. There have been clashes through the spring of 1876, and Washington has sent three columns of troops into the Montana territory to engage the Indian warriors and press them back westward. On this day, June 25, the soldiers of the southern column, comprising the 7th Cavalry, are attacking an Indian settlement in the valley of the Little Bighorn River and realize belatedly that they face more enemies than they had anticipated.

Were these endangered soldiers really confident that these hills and river valleys were their country's own? What might such an assertion signify? What status did it portend for the Lakota people, whose own grandparents had welcomed the explorers Lewis and Clark three-quarters of a century earlier but now faced a continuous incursion of miners, ranchers, and homesteaders? The Native Americans have their own economic relationship to these lands that includes hunting and seasonal migration as well as cultivation, confirmed by custom, but apparently unrecognized by the new settlers who keep arriving to mine, farm, and graze. Perhaps neither side really comprehends why the other must claim such a vast landscape. Under pressure the Indians have signed many agreements they believed would preserve diminished but guaranteed territory; but they have watched as these pacts have been unilaterally amended and their lands reduced. On this day, at least, they will give pause to their pursuers. Finally aware that he has imperiled his forces, General George A. Custer will divide his men in the