

David W Fletcher, March 2006

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VINE DELORIA, JR. 'S *CUSTER DIED FOR YOUR SINS*:
AN INDIAN MANIFESTO

Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005), a Native American activist, author, and executive director of the National Congress of American Indians during the turbulent 1960s, writes what he calls “an Indian Manifesto” in response to what he labels glibly “the Indian plight” (1). That *Custer Died for Your Sins*¹ is as much a vindictive attack, on white maltreatment of Indians, as a vindication of Indian rights, in light of uncharitable acts of the United States government, can be ascertained by a casual reading of the book. Deloria, a Standing Rock Sioux, is not bashful to speak unhesitatingly for Indians generally and, by doing so, may be guilty of one of the “sins” he charges against the white man. But the book is not intended to be a precise treatise with formal documentation, and to view Deloria’s work as such is to misunderstand his purpose. The author intends to write a personal statement and a broad one to be sure. He hardly is unaware of the role that history and science (e.g., anthropology) have played in determining the Indian’s “plight.”

The book is arranged topically and follows a general but sweeping chronology from roughly the post-Civil War era to the Civil Rights decade some one hundred years later. Deloria begins by addressing topics of Indian identity (chpt. 1), the historic problem of laws and treaties (chpt. 2), and the more recent disaster of “termination” (chpt. 3). With wit and sarcasm, Deloria attacks anthropologists and their scientific “study” of Indians (chpt. 4), the church and its

¹*Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969; reprint, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 278 pages with new preface and index.

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missionaries to the tribes (chpt. 5), and the federal government and its Indian agencies (chpt. 6). In a delightful chapter, he even pokes fun at others and Indians themselves (chpt. 7). Deloria's insight is keen; his criticisms are weighty; and his observations warrant reflection. His evaluation of the lack of Indian solidarity with blacks during the civil rights struggles (chpt. 8), the disintegration of Indian leadership in the twentieth century (chpt. 9), and his likening of corporate American society to tribalism (chpt. 10) are worth their weight in gold. His historical judgments cut deeply, and his castigations of so-called science hit hard. But in spite of his thorough-going western education in theology, history, and law, his *Weltanschauung* has its roots in native culture and religion and not the mores of western materialism and its legal and religious props. To take Deloria out of his native context is to misunderstand him.

Deloria, no doubt, uses shock therapy for the sake of both Indian and white man. Some of his exaggerations may need indeed to be refined and toned down a bit (e.g., concerning the work of anthropologists).² But Deloria wants to break down stereotypes that whites have had and continue to have about Indians. To do so, he feels compelled to go beyond humor and even ridicule to take up invective and bitter sarcasm. So much so, that one reviewer suggests that Deloria's "bitterness invites oversimplification and extremism."³ By way of caution, Deloria "warns that his *Manifesto* does not represent 'what *all* Indians are *really* thinking,'" so he feels

²See Alfonso Ortiz, "Review: *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*," *American Anthropologist* 73 (New Series), no. 4 (August 1971): 953-955.

³Kenneth M. Roemer, "Review: Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1970): 273.

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justified in using extreme measures “to inspire new Indian leaders and to shock and educate . . . non-Indians who . . . could and should be the Indians’ best friends.”⁴ Like most of Deloria’s works, *Custer Died for Your Sins* is a must read for its ability to evoke thoughtful critique of and emotional persuasion against what is regarded to be the norm.

⁴Ibid.