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## HISTORY COMMENTARY

### "So Vast an Enterprise"— Lewis & Clark Revisited

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We are a nation of storytellers. We tell stories about ourselves, our families, our friends, even our enemies. And when our lives are in bits and pieces we stitch the fragments together and make stories. Who we are is in our stories. And if we've forgotten how to tell them, then Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan can weave their magic to remind us.

So many American stories are about journeys. If we are a story-telling people, then we are also a nation of journey makers. Some of the earliest Native American stories are about journeys—and all of us have been making them and talking about them ever since. We are a people on the road, whether the road be the Trail of Tears, the Oregon Trail, or Route 66. We're on the road with Jack Kerouac and "On the Road Again" with Willie Nelson. We talk about "Home, Sweet Home," but it is the lure of the road and the promise of the journey that still holds us. Willa Cather once said that there are only two or three great human stories and we keep repeating them over and again. One of those is the journey story—the exodus, the odyssey, the long walk, the bitter trail.

Of all our journey stories, few have so fully captured our imagination as the one about Lewis and Clark. Lewis and Clark give us our first national road story. That story, that journey began here, at Monticello, Virginia—in the spacious mind of Thomas Jefferson—because all journeys begin at home, in the country of the mind.

Books change lives. Henry David Thoreau once asked, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book?" And that is exactly what happened here in the summer of 1802. Summer was a time for President Jefferson to escape Washington's humid days and political heat. The summer of 1802 was no exception. Here at Monticello, in his beloved book room, there was time to rest, read, and reflect. One of the books he read that summer changed the course of American history. Jefferson already had a large library of travel and exploration books. To that collection he now added Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal*. That book was Mackenzie's account of his epic journey from Atlantic to Pacific in 1793—ten years before Lewis and Clark. But it wasn't the daily details of Mackenzie's transcontinental trek that stunned the president. What shocked him were the book's final paragraphs. There, in a few hundred words, Mackenzie laid out a bold scheme for the British occupation of the West. This was the very West that Jefferson hoped would preserve American independence. This would be the West of free, self-reliant American farmers. Now it appeared as if the British lion might seize the country before the American eagle could make its nest. At that moment, in the book room at Monticello, reading Mackenzie, the Lewis and Clark expedition was born. Little wonder that William Clark called Jefferson "that great Chaructor the Main Spring" of the expedition.

The journey that Jefferson envisioned was no ordinary one, no simple adventure, no great American vacation. Like his Enlightenment contemporaries, Jefferson understood exploration as a way to gain useful knowledge—useful for ordinary citizens and certainly useful for the expansion of the American empire in the West. And make no mistake about it, the Great Character had empire on his mind. Pause for a moment and look at the exploration instructions Jefferson wrote for Meriwether Lewis in June 1803. What he drafted for Lewis became the master plan, the charter for federal exploration for the rest of the century. Jefferson gave his travelers one central mission—finding the elusive Northwest Passage. This was his geography of hope, his geography of illusion. But he never intended for Lewis and Clark to head west wearing blinders. Exploration is all about inquiry, about asking questions. The instructions for Lewis and Clark were filled with questions—questions about native peoples and cultures, plants, animals, the weather, and of course questions about what Jefferson gracefully called "the face of the country." Lewis and Clark questioned their way west. And their answers gave us the first volume in what became a great encyclopedia of the American West.

A journey with many aims and goals, a journey that began here—it soon became a journey that demanded many hands. Lots of us grew up thinking that the whole expedition really had just four actors—Lewis, Clark, Sacagawea, and the dog. Think again. Imagine the expedition as an infantry company on the move; better yet, think of it as a human community. Look closely at this community, at what Lewis once called "the best of families." Look at its diversity and variety. Consider York, a slave who went west, shared in all the delights and dangers of the journey, and then lived to have a deeply troubled relationship with his master. Consider George Drouillard, hunter and scout without equal—part Shawnee, part French. Consider Pierre Cruzatte, the one-eyed, fiddle-playing boatman; part-French, part-Omaha. Look into the faces of Sacagawea and her infant son, Jean Baptiste. But don't just look at them—listen to them: William Clark's Virginia-Kentucky accent, Sergeant John Ordway's New Hampshire twang, the German English of Private John Potts, and the first words and cries of a child raised in a linguistic Tower of Babel. What could be more American than this? This is the crazy quilt that was and is America. The Lewis and Clark story puts us on a journey with a distinctively American community. In a strange and mysterious way—even across the divide of two centuries and profound cultural differences—they are us, and we are them.

And more than that—this expedition community moved through the lands and lives of other communities. The West in 1803 was no empty place, no vast unknown. Everything that Lewis and Clark would come to see had already been seen and explored and mapped by native people. William Clark knew that. On the first day out from St. Louis he wrote that the expedition's "road across the continent" would take the Corps of Discovery through "a multitude of Indians." Let me put this as plainly as I know how. To understand this journey story, to appreciate its complexity and variety, we ought to get off the boat and stand on the bank. We should change the angle of vision. We need to see this emblematic American journey story through fresh eyes, through native eyes. And not just eyes and seeing but voices and hearing. If the only voices we hear are those of Lewis or Sergeant Ordway or Private Whitehouse, then we will have only half the conversation. We will get monologues instead of dialogues.

Let's ask: How did Jefferson's travelers look to the Yankton Sioux man Yellow Bear or the Nez Perce woman Watkuweis? What stories would Hidatsa chief Black Moccasin tell about his friendship with William Clark? What stories did those Lemhi Shoshone women who carried expedition baggage over the Great Divide tell the next day? And what did it mean when Walula chief Yellept wanted to trade his songs for those sung and played by the strangers? The point

here is a simple one—native people were at the center of the Lewis and Clark journey. They were not bystanders, mere extras playing bit parts. This was a journey that swept across a continental stage. The actors on that stage had names like Big Horse and Twisted Hair, Cameahwait and Coboway. Without their lines there really is no play. Without their voices we have no American conversation.

What began at Monticello in the summer of 1802 was a journey in search of knowledge. Now 200 years later we begin the journey again. What will we find along the trail? What will we learn about ourselves and our past—a past that keeps shoving its way into the present. We should look again at what Jefferson called "the face of the country." Lewis and Clark gave us a yardstick for measuring the ways we have changed the land over two centuries. We've plowed the plains, dammed the rivers, and laced the skies with high tension wires. The West was no Garden of Eden in 1803, but things have changed. Lewis and Clark can help us understand how much has been transformed and how much endures. Now we need to join with Indian nations in preserving sacred places throughout the West and especially along the trail. And on the trail we will hear what Jefferson called "the names of the nations." The names are constant reminders of the lasting presence and continued vitality of Native North America.

And as we march the Bicentennial trail, as we hear the many journey stories, we should not pretend that they are easy ones to tell, easy ones to hear. The Lewis and Clark stories do not always offer simple truths and comforting answers. If we want stories of comfort and triumph, we should go some other place. Their journey, our journey, takes us to moments of genuine friendship and openhanded cooperation but also to places of suspicion and violence. We need to get right with Lewis and Clark, and that means getting right with an often deeply troubled, troubling past. The best human stories, the most revealing ones, are the prickly ones, the ones that chew on us and won't let us go.

The Bicentennial journey begins here. If we finish the journey in 2006 being the same people we are now, then what William Clark called "so Vast an Enterprise" will have failed. Journeys should change us. Whether we are natives or newcomers, this journey—those voices—these stories should expand and enrich us. All of this should enlarge us, bringing us face to face with wonder and strangeness.

Two centuries ago Thomas Jefferson compared Lewis and Clark to artists "filling up the canvas we begin." The painting that is America is yet incomplete. The journey begun here is yet unfinished. The trail beckons; the voices from the past call out to us. Now is the time to begin.

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