

# Lewis and Clark assignment

[History](#)



Lewis was Thomas Jefferson's right hand man in the White House. He lived in the White House, with Jefferson, just the two of them. He lived in the East Wing, and Jefferson lived in the presidential quarters. Ate every night with Jefferson. He knew Jefferson's mind. He was Jefferson's hand-picked man for many tasks, and for this pet project of Jefferson, there was only one man he wanted. It was Meriwether Lewis. He was brash, sometimes impulsive. One of the cabinet members warned Jefferson, " Well, watch out. Lewis might try to do some things too brashly, too rashly, and endanger the whole expedition." But he was gonna be Thomas Jefferson's eyes and ears in the West, and Jefferson trusted him. Lewis had what Jefferson described as " occasional depressions of the mind." It's, I don't like to get into psycho babble, but it's pretty easy to read into Meriwether Lewis a manic depressive. He could be full of vigor and effusiveness, and other times almost completely close down.

Lewis was the man, who was, it seems to read the journals, never entirely easy with with his own men and definitely not with the with the Indians that he was meeting. He got along with them, he he behaved in a courtly manner and a proper manner, a military manner but there was not that ease that that you see in Clark. We we know that there were various kinds of assignations between the men and and Indian women. You never have that sense in reading the journals that that Lewis was a participant in this. The love stories that people have concocted and I emphasize the word concocted, with Sacagawea and the other men. It's always Clark who is the lover, it's never Lewis. Lewis is the cool one.

Clark, the both men of course were military men, Lewis also, Clark was the older of the two. Clark was the the man who had the practicality always to be able to to find a solution, whatever the problem was. I have a sense that in a way, he was he was the the rod in the spine of of Lewis. I don't mean to say that Lewis was weak because clearly he wasn't. But it was Clark's force of personality, his capacity to deal with with the men, all of whom were were not formally educated. That gave Lewis his discipline and his intelligence the the force, the power to make it, make it go, to make it active.

As, as a cartographer, Clark was without peer, not in the sense that he produced elegant maps, in, in the same sense that, that the Army topographers of, of the 1850's produced elegant maps. What made Clark so, so marvelous as a cartographer, even though his, his maps look to us today to be a bit crude, was that he had an incredible instinct and, and feel for the landscape. He seemed to know what was the most logical direction for a river to take, once it got out of his line of sight. If you look at, at Clark's maps as, as field exercises in and by themselves, as opposed to looking at them as finished products of, of cartography, you, you see a, a, a beauty in the ability of, of this guy to, to recognize the landscape, to convert what he's seeing in a horizontal perspective into that vertical map perspective. It, it's the hardest thing that people do in, in dealing with space. As a geographer, one of the things that I, I have to teach my students at the very beginning of their training, is how to convert what they're seeing to that map perspective. Most people can't do that, most people can't see that readily. Clark could, and he could see it better than, than almost any other explorer that I know of, and, and as a consequence, he is without peer as a map maker, given the

state of his equipment, given the nature of, of overall cartographic technology, that nobody is his equal.

I think Lewis knew that he needed somebody to help him on the expedition. I think somewhere deep down, he knew that he needed somebody he could count on. And the person he could count the most on was William Clark. I think he, he offered Clark not only to be a co-captain, but he said, “ If you can’t do this,” when he wrote him a letter, “ if you can’t do this, how about going at least part way up the river. And then go home.” But I think that somewhere deep down, Meriwether Lewis knew that he couldn’t make it on his own.

Every time that they met an Indian tribe, they had three things they wanted to do. They wanted to find out about them for Jefferson. They wanted to establish trade relations because that’s gonna be part of an empire for the United States. And they wanted to say, “ You are now part of the United States. You have a new Great Father.” And part of all of that was, “ You gotta stop fighting one another. You know, it doesn’t help us for trade, it doesn’t help us, you know, as a nation if you’re fighting one another.” And they just couldn’t understand how traditional it was on the Plains, and how for tribes to fight one another. I mean, it makes sense, you know, they all had different objectives that they wanted to, things that they want to do. Hunting grounds, raiding, all those things were imbedded in the Plains warrior culture, and they’d thought that if they just said, “ Now we’re here, just stop fighting, we’ll give you some goods and it’s OK.” Clark was trying to explaining this one time to an Hidatsa warrior, about well we’ve got these plans for peace and everything. And the warrior listened for a while and then he just said, “  
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But if we have peace, how will we have chiefs?” Because the way that their culture ennobled somebody, to make them rise in the ranks of the tribe, was through warfare. So he said, “ If we don’t fight one another, how do we exist, how do we have chiefs?” And I think that moment is, shows the, still this misunderstanding between two cultures.

I don’t think they would [think about it] a whole lot. They might of for a little bit. Mainly because those are the folks there that did the same thing, before them. The Frenchmen came in for example, the British came in for example from Hudson Bay territory, what is now Canada, and did the same thing. They gave them, they gave them flags. Even during that time of course, the British and the French knew something was happening so they gave them flags and medals and everything else. And I think by then they had been visited by quite a few people, and, and so it wasn’t a, a big thing, but I think by then they realized it was a routine that they had to go through. They would listen to the speeches and, and accepting the medals, accepting different, different gifts, and, and in fact, the tribe at that time expected gifts, and they expected everybody to get one, get something. And, and I know in one instance, I think the ???? talked about not having everybody get everything and so they were upset about that. And so by then they had already started to.

You could call their Indian diplomacy the great traveling medicine show because they really did have a pattern, a pattern that they had inherited from generations of Indian policy that began in the Northeast woodlands and then went out into the West. The traveling medicine show worked like this, first there was a parade in which European style technology was shown off.

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You wanted to show Indians uniforms and guns and the objects of the industrial revolution to impress them and then you wanted to show Indians trade goods and so the great country store was wheeled out. You wanted to show Indians all of those objects that they might gain if they became part of an industrial world that grew out of St Louis. And so, first the parade and then the country store and then came the serious negotiation because Lewis and Clark represented in the traveling medicine show not only military power, commercial power, but also diplomatic power. So the third part of the traveling medicine show was some serious negotiation. Some treaty talk, some council making. And then there was always a showing of the flag, the great American symbol of sovereignty and power.

What did the peace medal symbolize?

Peace medals symbolized two very different things. And they represent two different things on two different sides of the cultural divide. For Euro-Americans, for Thomas Jefferson's captains, the peace medal represented a recognition of American sovereignty. If I give you a peace medal, it means that you are now one of mine. That you've accepted the sovereignty of the American president. On the other hand, for native people, accepting a peace medal might simply mean a recognition that we are equals. We are not fathers and sons, not fathers and children, but we're all one. And the peace medal also represented a source of power. Native people often believed that the power that the Europeans had were not in their own bodies, but in their objects. And so the peace medal is a wonderful symbol of difference. Europeans saw it as a sign of subjection. Of accepting European power. But

native people who took those peace medals saw it in a very different way. Saw it as a gift. Saw it as recognizing that we are equals.

In a nutshell, what happened to our people in the years after Lewis and Clark is that we went downhill. In a nutshell, we lost. Like, like all the other tribes that Lewis and Clark, not only opened up a route, established a waterway and established a new country and did scientific value for, after Lewis, after the Louisiana Purchase. But, they, they changed the people. We, we, we started going from a dependency on the environment, on the spiritualism of the land, to a dependency on the traders and the military and everything else that came after Lewis and Clark. So it, it, we, we, we essentially lost.

Sometimes we talk about the expedition as the great American odyssey. If the Civil War is our Iliad, then this is our odyssey. You know, one of the ways to understand American history is to think about our history as a series of journeys. We're forever going somewhere. All the coyote stories begin, Coyote was going there. So Coyote is going there. Kiowa people are going somewhere, we're always going somewhere. We've attached great meaning to the Lewis and Clark story because it's an emblem of us being on the road. We're a people on the road, we're a people caught in a tension between wanting to be at home and yet being always on the road. It's a tension that is pervasive in our culture. It's hard sometimes to understand why the Lewis and Clark story is so important. After all, Lewis and Clark didn't start the western fur trade. They don't pioneer a route that other overland immigrants will use. Those routes are pioneered by others. Lewis and Clark don't provide the legal framework for an American claim to the Pacific Northwest, that came from other travelers. I think that we've seized on them

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because they remind us about the journey. Life is a journey. They were on the road. We're on the road too. We see that in our literature, in our writing. From Pilgrim's Progress and Canterbury Tales to John Wayne in Stagecoach. We think about life as a journey. The Lewis and Clark journey is so accessible. We can all get on board. We can be members of the Corps of Discovery. We can slip our own lives into their lives and then we can make the journey with them. A journey of wonder and excitement. But also, a frightening journey, a journey of danger, we can be with them. We can also stand on shore and watch them as they come to us. This is one of the central American stories. It has, like few other stories, a place for all of us. All of us want to find a place in story. And this is one of those stories that reaches out and says, there is a place in this story for you.

Teamwork. The number one story here is there is nothing that men can't do if they get themselves together and act as a team. Here you have 32 men who had become so close, so bonded, that everyone of them could recognize a cough in the night and know who it was. They could hear a footstep and know who it was. They knew who liked salt on their meat and who didn't. They knew who's the best shot on the expedition. Who is the fastest runner. Who is the man who could get a fire going the quickest on a rainy day. They knew, because they sat around the campfire, about each other's parents and loved ones. Each other's hopes. And they had come to love each other. To the point that they would sell their own lives gladly to save a comrade. They had developed a bond, they had become a band of brothers, and together they were able to accomplish feats that we just stand astonished at today when we look at them. The crossing of the continent with nothing but rifles



to depend on in the face of dangers, of the, the greatest possible imaginable dangers and physical difficulties. To, to manage the portage of the Great Falls, to get over the Lolo Trail, to go down that Columbia River, these are feats that, had they not welded themselves together into that team, they just could not possibly have accomplished. So, I think the number one human lesson of the Lewis and Clark expedition is, what can be accomplished by a team of disciplined men who are dedicated to a common purpose.

They weren't just men.

Very much so. It's not just a team of men. It includes a young Indian girl, who saved the expedition on numerous occasions, sometimes even from starvation, when she could find roots that nobody else knew about. And obviously in dealing with Cameahwait and the Shoshonis. And she brought a woman's touch to this expedition. I like to think as she was nursing Pomp at night around the campfire, that scene had to have had a great effect on the men, to hear a woman's laugh at night around the campfire bolstered spirits. To have Sacagawea say to them, " That's the Beaverhead, we're getting close to the Three Forks, we're on the right trail." All that lifted spirits when spirits were very low and they thought they'd never come to an end of this journey.