

Do Lewis and Clark Matter?

Carolyn Gilman

About a year ago, Slate magazine ran an article headlined, “Lewis and Clark: Stop Celebrating. They Don’t Matter.” It was a witty piece, and we all had a good laugh. But I noticed that no one ever replied to it. Maybe it was because the reasons why Lewis & Clark matter were so obvious that no one needed to state them. Or maybe it was because we really couldn’t think of any.

It’s a question that has come up since then, often raised by teachers who are struggling to explain to students what a 200-year-old exploring party can teach a country worried about terrorism and tyranny, coping with globalization and hoping for the spread of democracy abroad. It was a question we were forced to examine while planning the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition. In the exhibit and its related curriculum materials, we answered the question obliquely by tackling themes like diplomacy, trade, and gender; today I’d like to do it explicitly.

Rep. Ike Skelton sits on the House Armed Services Committee in Washington, DC. He was recently quoted in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch saying that too many senior officials who testify before his committee lack insight into the current relevance of past problems faced by Americans. He said, “I believe that . . . if you don’t know where you came from, you don’t know where you’re going.” He recommended a reading list on the history of war. The first book on the list was the U.S. Constitution. The second was an ancient Chinese text, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu’s first precept was eerily echoed by Robert McNamara in the recent film *The Fog of War*. It was, know your enemy. Sun Tzu (but interestingly, not McNamara) added a second bit of advice: know yourself. Perhaps, in light of recent international events, we should add a third: know your friends.

I think Lewis and Clark can help us with all these challenges, knowing others and knowing ourselves. Let’s see how. The Corps of Discovery was an army expedition that went into the equivalent of a foreign land with orders that were based on faulty intelligence. Is it just me, or is this already beginning to sound familiar? Actually, it would probably be hard to find an army expedition about which you couldn’t say the same. Bad intelligence is a fact of life in the military, and the crucial question is how you adjust to it.

John Logan Allen has written a masterful book on Lewis & Clark’s geographic misinformation, and how it affected the expedition. The main piece of faulty data they set out with was contained in a message from president Jefferson to Congress: “the Missouri, traversing a moderate climate, offer[s] . . . a continued

navigation from its source, and, possibly with a single portage, from the Western ocean.” Today’s Defense Department, with its love of acronyms, would probably say Lewis and Clark were looking for the NWP – Northwest Passage. As we all know, no NWPs were ever found. Today, there would probably be a congressional investigation. “What did the president know, and when did he know it?”

But of equal relevance to us today is their information (or misinformation) about the people they were going to meet.

In the intelligence community today, there is a term for a basic error that analysts are taught to avoid: it is called mirroring. It means projecting onto others one’s own motives, values, and ways of thinking. Recently, there has been a lot of discussion of whether we in the West have been mirroring in our dealings with the East. Paul Wolfowitz, interviewed by Vanity Fair, described this as “The kind of mistake that, in a sense, I think we made implicitly in assuming that anyone who was intelligent enough to fly an airplane wouldn’t commit suicide with it.” Similarly, Condoleezza Rice argued that when Saddam Hussein was refusing to account for missing stockpiles of botulinum toxin and anthrax, “I don’t know how you could have come to any other conclusion but that he had weapons of mass destruction.” To assume otherwise, she said, would have been to think he was not behaving rationally.

Wolfowitz and Rice are both raising the same question: Is our definition of rationality universal? Can we assume that people of other cultures are going to want the things we want and behave the ways we do? And what are the consequences if we are wrong?

Lewis and Clark faced the same problem two hundred years ago. Let’s step back and look at what they were doing in the West the way Rice and Wolfowitz would have if they had been working for Thomas Jefferson.

In the short run, Jefferson’s intentions for the Louisiana Territory were to use it as a kind of pressure valve to reduce tensions between American settlers east of the Mississippi and the Indian inhabitants of that land. The Shawnees, Delawares, Miamis, Winnebagoes, Potawatomes, and other tribes of the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes would be moved out onto the plains as Euro-American farmers took over their lands in the east. But in the long run, his intentions were more ambitious: he wanted to make the Louisiana Territory into a nation-state. In fact, he wanted to do that thing we argue about so much today: nation building.

Now, nation building is a quintessentially Enlightenment activity. Stripped down to essentials, it is the imposition of a rational structure on society. For centuries, societies around the globe had been organized into groups based on common attributes like shared languages, ethnicities, religions, races, or

customs. In the 18th century, nation builders started jettisoning these ancient ways of organizing people and substituted formal government institutions based on rational rules. Modern nations do not consist of groups who have shared cultures or histories; they consist of legislatures, courts, and bureaucracies, who obey a written constitution and laws. We have just had a beautiful illustration of this principle in Iraq. Why don't we just let Iraq splinter apart into Kurdistan, Sunnistan, and Shiastan? For the same reason Jefferson didn't want a Lakotastan or a Shoshonestan in the west: because that runs counter to the whole idea of nation-building. Nations are constructed to make people jettison old tribal animosities and to give them a forum and process to work out their differences together, in a rational, well-regulated way. Nations are fundamentally revolutionary: they break up older groups, draw lines where none existed before, and force a reorganization of society according to technocratic principles.

During the 19th century virtually every corner of the globe was carved up into nations. But in 1803, this process was in its infancy, and nations were still the exception rather than the rule. They were an alien concept to the people of western North America. But that doesn't mean the Native tribes had no political organization. Let's compare some of the attributes of the Euro-American nation to the attributes of tribal society. I'll give three examples: hierarchy, delegation of authority, and individualism.

Euro-American societies used an organizing principle that seemed natural and logical to them: hierarchy. There were classes of people who commanded and people who obeyed, ranked in a pyramid. This principle was mirrored everywhere – in the government, in the military, in companies, in religious institutions. It was true even in the Corps of Discovery, which (though it was a tiny group of people) was organized into three ranks: captains or commissioned officers, sergeants or noncommissioned officers, and privates. But in the Indian societies Lewis and Clark met, hierarchy was far less important as an organizing principle. Instead, the best metaphor for Plains Indian social organization was the web or network. There were nodes of power that overlapped one another, and interconnected. Clans were groups based on biological relationship that acted as the social safety net, and also exercised religious responsibilities. They saw to the welfare of children and socialized them properly, teaching both civic and religious duties. Societies were organizations based on the members' visions, achievements, or age, and they had both ceremonial and civic roles. Bands or villages were voluntary groups of people who lived together for mutual security and trade. They were the primary political division. Tribes were loosely allied groups of bands that shared a language and culture. In addition to these groups, power might also be exercised by the council of elders, owners of sacred bundles or pipes, and heads of families. Each might have different policies, and different objectives – but they exercised authority in their own spheres, and interlocked in a mesh that made up Indian society. In fact, the

system of overlapping powers was so complex and subtle that European visitors rarely grasped it at first.

Lewis and Clark set out with some assumptions that made it difficult for them to see Indian political structure correctly. They did not use the term “social evolution,” but they nevertheless had a concept of universal social development that progressed in phases from hunting and gathering to pastoralism to agriculture to commercial society. One of the central tenets of the school of Scottish philosophers who developed this theory was that society progressed from simple to complex. Lewis and Clark expected the Indians to be at an earlier stage of social development, and so they expected them to be simple. When they came across the dizzying web of overlapping institutions that made up Indian society, they didn’t conclude it was complex. Instead, they mirrored. Assuming that the Indians would use a simplified version of their own system, they projected ranks and classes onto the tribes they met. Their silver peace and friendship medals showed this clearly: The medals came in five graduated sizes in order to designate five “ranks” of chief. For privates, they brought along paper certificates. Clark’s journals are full of lists of names, his effort to identify who commanded and who obeyed. Instead of trying to decipher Indian society on its own terms, they acted as if dealing with their own.

I have to mention, we continue to project our hierarchical notions on tribal peoples around the world today. Often, when we are faced with an organized group that challenges us, our first question is, “Who is in charge?” We think someone must be giving orders, the organization must be centralized and pyramidal, because that’s how we would do it. So we spend enormous amounts of effort trying to hunt down people like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, because we see them as the CEOs without whose say-so nothing would be happening. But what if we are dealing with a weblike organization with many overlapping nodes of power, each more or less independent? What if Al Qaeda isn’t even one organization, but a fabric of many? If so, chopping off the head would not have the desired effect. Recently, a senior counterterrorism official in Europe was quoted in the New York Times saying, “We continue to disrupt Al Qaeda’s activities and capture more of their leaders, but the attacks are escalating. . . . This is a very bad sign. There are fewer leaders but more followers.” Perhaps if we had paid better attention to Indian society, we might have anticipated this.

Let’s take another example: delegation of authority. In European tradition, leaders were given the power to speak for everyone under them in the hierarchy, and could compel obedience from them. The political theory behind this, at least according to John Locke, was that the people had vested their leaders with power to make decisions for the public good, and once this delegation had taken place, the leader’s decisions were binding on all. Euro-Americans also obeyed because they respected the office even if they didn’t

respect the person holding it.

In Indian society, leadership was based on the personal attributes of the great man (or, in rare cases, the great woman): wisdom, persuasive oratory, or ability to rally supporters. Authority did not lie in the office, but in the individual. As Charles Garnett, a Lakota, put it, “A chief’s authority depended on his personality and his ability to compel others to do his will, and if he were successful in his undertakings, followers were apt to flock to him. . . . If he were weak or cowardly . . . his people deserted him, and he became a person of little consequence, though he might be the head chief of the tribe.” Lewis and Clark understood and commented on this custom: “The power of the chief,” Clark wrote, “is rather the influence of character than the force of authority.” Lewis added, “each individual is his own sovereign master, and acts from the dictates of his own mind; the authority of the Chief being nothing more than mere admonition.” No one was obliged to follow a chief’s orders for any reason other than personal respect, fear, or expectation of gain. No chief could make a commitment for anyone but himself. Chiefs might even change according to circumstance: whether there was a state of war, hunting, or diplomacy. Power was fluid and context-dependent.

Emissaries of the U.S. government were perennially frustrated by this aspect of Indian society. When Jefferson wanted to negotiate with France, he sent delegates to Napoleon, and whatever commitment the emperor made, the French obeyed. It was not so in an Indian community. Making a treaty with a chief assured nothing but the commitment of that individual, and whoever he could persuade to agree with him. There was almost no way to reach an agreement that everyone would respect.

Lewis and Clark’s strategy for dealing with this was the same as many other U.S. emissaries: they called it “making chiefs.” They selected a prominent, cooperative leader and designated him the chief for purposes of negotiating with the U.S., by dressing him with European symbols of authority – uniform coat, cocked hat, gorget, medal, and sword. This often failed to work. The problem was not always the simplistic one, that they chose the wrong person – often the chiefs they recognized were respected men. But there were more fundamental underlying problems. Because of the Indian concept of contextual leadership, as soon as the situation changed, the leader was likely to change as well. And because there was no concept of delegation of authority, the chief had no power to compel obedience even when he was in charge.

Now, think of the Iraqi Governing Council and President Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan: all are people selected by the U.S. and honored with Euro-American symbols of authority. On the surface they look and talk like Western leaders; they work in imposing buildings and appoint people to positions in charge of Ministries. But our symbols don’t always inspire the same respect

outside our culture. In Iraq, the real power continues to lie with people like Ayatollah Sistani, and in Afghanistan warlords like Ismail Khan continue to rule by personal authority regardless of whether they have formal titles or offices. In both places, the U.S. is obliged to sidestep our own designated chiefs and negotiate with leaders from a parallel, indigenous political system we can't abolish, however we try to ignore it. The same thing happened over and over in our relations with Indian tribes. Imposing a Western-style national system didn't work the same way it would in our country, because it was layered over an already-existing system.

Let's take a third example: individualism. This word can mean a lot of things, but here I mean the American concept that the individual was the smallest unit of society, and the unit to which laws and rights applied. In our legal system, it is individuals who break the law – not families, not clans – and individuals who are taken to account. Similarly, the rights guaranteed by the Constitution are guaranteed to individuals, not to ethnic groups or races or corporations. In a tribal society, people's identities derived from the groups they belonged to, and those groups were seen as having a collective responsibility for their members' actions. In war or other conflicts, revenge could legitimately be taken on other members of the group, and the group could also make reparations to settle the dispute. For example, Sacagawea was not a combatant in the war between the Hidatsa and Shoshone, but she became a war prisoner as part of the score-settling between those groups.

Recently, we have come face to face with this same system in the tribal regions of Pakistan where the U.S. is trying to hunt down Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. Pakistan recently adopted a policy of holding whole tribes responsible for harboring fugitives, punishing groups for the crimes of individuals. This occasioned a debate in American legal circles. George Fletcher, a law professor at Columbia, argued that "It doesn't follow from collective guilt that you can impose collective punishment," because moral responsibility should rest with the individual, not the family, tribe or nation. On the other hand, Daryl J. Levinson defended the practice in the *Stanford Law Review*. But the most relevant comment came from Lt. Gen. Syed Iftikhar Hussain Shah, the governor of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. "There is this age-old system of collective responsibility," he said. In Pakistan, unlike America, custom trumps legal theory.

Those are three examples of ways in which the political assumptions of tribal cultures were incompatible with those of the nation-state, then and now. But differing assumptions about the exercise of power are not the only ones Lewis and Clark encountered. Then as now, trade and property were also arenas where cultural contrasts appeared in high relief. Much of Jefferson's Indian policy was based on an Enlightenment assumption that economic decisions everywhere were driven by "rational self-interest,"

which was universal and cross-cultural. One of the principal inducements Jefferson offered Indians to give up their lifeways and join his American project was material gain: by participating in American commerce, they would enjoy greater prosperity. Clark expressed it this way in a speech to a Hidatsa war leader: “We advised him . . . that by being at peace and having plenty of goods amongst them & a free intercourse with those defenceless nations, they would get on easy terms a great Number of horses.” If rational self-interest was indeed the driving force Clark assumed, then the Indians would surely follow his advice.

But Lewis and Clark’s experiences did not bear out this theory. Their economic interactions with the Indians, especially the commercially experienced Chinookans on the west coast, was a constant source of frustration. The Indians demanded goods that Lewis criticized as having no “usefulness or value,” and rather than strike a bargain and take their profit, they “will be a whole day bargaining for a handfull of roots.” Since these practices seemed contrary to rational self-interest, Lewis and Clark concluded the Indians were irrational.

What they hadn’t accounted for was the role of what economic anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu has called “symbolic capital.” Symbolic capital consists of social benefits such as prestige, honor, obligation, and friendship. In Europe, these were not part of a commercial transaction. Buying and selling were impersonal acts done for mutual profit. The value of the goods had nothing to do with either party’s character; prices were determined by laws such as supply and demand. But in Indian society, trade was a relationship, and its purpose was to negotiate intangibles such as status, character, and power. The goods were just symbols that carried these messages, as counters in a game might carry the message of who was winning.

One example of how this social role of trade worked was often remarked on by explorers. In Europe, the leading men were the richest, because they accumulated great wealth from taxes, rents, and the profits generated by capital. A rich man was respected. In an Indian village, the leaders were often the poorest, because to achieve status they were obliged to show generosity by giving gifts, supporting the poor, and rewarding their kin. In return for lavish distributions of their wealth, they received intangible symbolic capital – the admiration and obligation of their neighbors.

During the expedition, Lewis and Clark learned that stingy distributions of gifts undermined their authority, despite their arms and uniforms. It was the precipitating dispute in their meeting with the Sioux. Ordway recorded that the Teton “did not appear to talk much untill they had got the goods, and then they wanted more, and Said we must Stop with them or leave one of the pearogues with them.” Lewis and Clark had claimed the right to be addressed as Father,

but they shirked the responsibility of a father to give away all he owned. The result was a loss in status that exposed them to insults and aggression. Later in life, when Clark had to supervise the distribution of annuities, he and his agents learned the deeply disruptive effect the government payments had on tribal power structures. Chiefs regularly petitioned the government to be allowed to distribute the annuities themselves, because without gifts their status suffered a fatal decline.

The same system is still in effect in tribal and village societies today, and Americans still have trouble coping with it. My best example comes from Afghanistan. In the province of Kandahar, the warlord-governor, Gul Agha Shirzai, was replaced with a college-educated, English-speaking city planner named Yusuf Pashtun. But among the many difficulties Pashtun has in maintaining control is a lack of gifts. As the New York Times put it, “The former governor reaped millions of dollars from customs duties at the nearby border with Pakistan, but Mr. Pashtun is sending the customs duties to Kabul. . . . That move should improve relations with the central government, but it will upset tribal leaders used to handouts for their communities. . . . ‘His pockets were deep,’ one local official said of the previous governor.”

There is a fundamental clash of values here. What we in the West regard as corruption and nepotism, a tribal society regards as an obligation to kin and followers, essential for maintaining honor and status. The crucial difference between what Gul Agha Shirzai did and what Yusuf Pashtun does is that the former redistributed wealth personally, while the latter does it through a modern bureaucracy. We see the bureaucratic route as more legitimate, because it is subject to laws and procedures put in place to be fair. They regard the personal route as more legitimate, because there is more accountability: they know who to thank, and who to blame if it goes wrong.

Another assumption Lewis and Clark made about their trade goods is one that we often make today: that American goods are capable of communicating American cultural values. This idea is implicit in many discussions of globalization, both by advocates and critics. In the 1990s, McDonalds became a worldwide symbol for the franchization of American consumer culture. More recently, Major George Sarabia, a spokesman for the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment, said to a New York Times reporter in Baghdad, “One of our weapons is our culture. . . . Part of the reason why we won the cold war is because of the military. But one of the reasons is because of the Beatles and bluejeans.”

In his way, Jefferson agreed with Sarabia. You will recall that Jefferson was eager to introduce the Indians to American agriculture, and the values of independence and love of freedom that farming produced. To that end, he advised Lewis to take on the expedition several corn mills to dazzle the Indians with the ingenious, labor-saving mechanisms that an agricultural lifestyle

offered them. When the Corps presented the devices to the Arikara and Mandan, who had been farming and grinding corn their own way for generations, Clark wrote that the mills were “verry Thankfully recived.” And yet a year later, when Alexander Henry visited the Mandan, he saw “the remains of an excellent large corn mill, which the foolish fellows had demolished to barb their arrows.” Far from inducing Mandan men to aspire to become yeoman farmers, the corn mill ended up supporting traditional roles and values.

The corn mill story carries a caution for us today: we think we are selling our values with our products, but often what is happening is that other cultures are dismantling both our mechanisms and their messages to make them more culturally appropriate. The same is true of McDonalds and bluejeans. It would be perilous to assume that a bluejeaned Bangladeshi thinks the same as her counterpart in this country. For two hundred years American Indians have been bombarded with U.S. material culture, and today their homes and wardrobes are indistinguishable from the majority culture’s. And yet, they remain profoundly different. All these examples of disjunctions between our assumptions and those of traditional cultures have profound implications for the great American project to spread democracy and free markets around the world.

One of Thomas Jefferson’s fundamental assumptions about the Indians was that, offered the benefits of U.S. society, they would eagerly embrace it and voluntarily jettison their own cultures. The future he saw for Indians was a peaceful and natural transition into freeholders and republicans. Generations of Americans have felt, like Jefferson, that the benefits of democracy are so obvious that, given the right to choose, everyone would choose to be just like us.

In the first two euphoric decades after the end of the Cold War, many of us made that assumption about the world. Now, as we see the dizzying variety of ways democracy plays out in countries with different cultural traditions, we have stopped being so simplistic. The transition to democracy has proved rife with unintended consequences. Yale Law School professor Amy Chua has pointed out in her book *World on Fire* that free market democracy can be a recipe for ethnic hatred, divisiveness, and even genocide in countries like the Philippines, with wealthy ethnic minorities and poor, resentful majorities. Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz brings up the example of how in Rwanda, the transition from customary to written law put land formerly controlled by women under male ownership, an outcome Western experts failed to anticipate. And Fareed Zacharia, author of *The Future of Freedom*, says, “the idea that you can just hold elections while everything else remains feudal, medieval, means you won’t get democracy but some perversion of it.” He argues for allowing countries to first pass through a period of gradually

liberalizing autocracy.

Can Lewis and Clark teach us anything in this confusing situation? Well, maybe. First, the expedition was one of the earliest examples of the puzzling American tendency to introduce free commerce and democracy with its army. The rationale was the same then as today: the main impediment to commerce in the Missouri Valley was lack of security, and Lewis and Clark spent most of 1804-05 trying to persuade warring tribes to lay down their arms. Ultimately they failed through lack of men, resources, or strategies to enforce the peace. The consequences of their failure were a conflict between the U.S. and the Sioux that would not end until the battle of Little Big Horn and the massacre at Wounded Knee; and a conflict with the Blackfeet that would redirect the course of commerce and settlement to more southern routes, making the Lewis and Clark trail irrelevant in history. Perhaps the army was just too blunt an instrument for the delicate work of establishing diplomatic relations in the West.

But we shouldn't ignore the fact that in other cases, Lewis and Clark succeeded. When you look closely at their successes among the Mandan, Nez Perce, and Shoshone, you see some interesting similarities. When they found common ground with other cultures, they were often interacting on the most pragmatic, daily-life level: buying food and horses, asking directions, socializing, eating, dancing and singing together. Today, the most heartening stories we hear coming out of Iraq are similar: young Army officers collaborating with Iraqis in mundane tasks like getting a power plant running, opening a cigarette factory, or building a school. On that small-scale, personal level, bridges are being built, cultural divides are being crossed, and the best legacy of Lewis and Clark is continuing.

But I'd like to point out another lesson. Euro-Americans everywhere tend to regard themselves and their doings as central to the lives of everyone they meet. We see ourselves as the doers on this earth. So when we see things happening in the world, we attribute them to our influence. During the Cold War our imaginations transformed the developing world into a patchwork of proxies for ourselves, the Soviet Union, and Maoist China. Everything that happened was about the war of communism and capitalism. There were no other issues. This idea led us into a war in Vietnam that we saw as a conflict of Cold War ideologies, and the North Vietnamese saw as a war to liberate their country from colonial occupiers.

When Lewis and Clark met the Lakota in 1804, they saw that meeting as a crucial turning point in Lakota history. Euro-American historians have continued to take that view, because of all the changes that meeting foreshadowed in the Lakota future. But in the Smithsonian is a document that shows history from the Lakota point of view. It is an artwork called a winter

count, drawn on buffalo hide by a historian named Lone Dog. On it, a series of icons is arranged in a spiral. Each icon represents the most important event of a given year. Lone Dog's winter count covers the year 1804. But when you look for the Lakota perspective on Lewis and Clark, you find something interesting: they don't even appear. To the Lakota, they weren't important enough to mention. Instead, Lone Dog showed a war party against the Pawnee. To them, the rivalries of tribes were what mattered; the Europeans were useful as arms dealers, but ultimately bystanders to the real conflict.

I was struck by the similarities on March 6, when I read an article in the New York Times by Vali Nasr on how the bombings in Iraq look to the Islamic world. In American papers, we read how violence directed against Iraqis is really all about us, an effort to destabilize the country so the U.S. will find it ungovernable. But to them, it is the latest episode in a continuing conflict of Shiite and Sunni, in which Americans are seen as having interceded on the Shiite side. The real war is between Islamic sects; the U.S. is simply the arms merchant that has temporarily upset the balance.

This is both disconcerting and comforting. Neither Lewis and Clark nor we are the most important events in other people's years. In fact, America the global hegemon may simply be caught in the crossfire between enemies we have barely heard of and cannot understand. The bullets aren't always aimed at us; but that's no comfort unless we start to figure out who they are aimed at, and why. Until we learn to see the world through others' eyes, and stop blocking the view with our own bulk, we can't be safe. And so, ironically, perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Lewis and Clark is about their unimportance.