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Legacy of the Lewis & Clark Expedition

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It is a real pleasure and honor to be here with you this morning. I have been immersed in the Lewis and Clark story for a number of years. I am a historian by training so the Lewis and Clark story is not new and, in fact, it is a story that I became quite bored with probably 25 years ago. But my interest in Lewis and Clark has indeed been rekindled as I looked at it from different perspectives and examined it from different directions. I want to try to offer you a few of those thoughts this morning.

I have become heavily involved with the story of Lewis and Clark over the last several years as the Missouri Historical Society has organized *Lewis and Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition*, which I hope you will all have an opportunity to see. It really is the largest reunion of Lewis and Clark related materials since the expedition returned to St. Louis in 1806. I am also involved in the Bicentennial as co-chair of the Missouri Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission and also as the chair of the National Council of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial with responsibilities for the bicentennial nationwide.

Yet what has always fascinated me is that in many respects the Louisiana Purchase which prompted the Lewis and Clark expedition was the act of President Thomas Jefferson who, in my view, was a complicated and extraordinary man with lots

of ambiguities and lots of contradictions from which, of course, none of us are fully immune. Jefferson's view was that in the long run America would prosper best and democracy would flourish in a society in which the largest possible number of Americans had as he saw it a stake. And that stake would come through land ownership. So Jefferson overcame his constitutional scruples and made the decision to purchase Louisiana which more than doubled the size of the American nation. This was an extraordinary act from a man who was a strict constructionist when it came to the constitution. But his view of America was one that has passed. It is one that has died. Jefferson's view in many respects was that by the purchase of Louisiana he had guaranteed his vision of the future of an America of free landholders. He had acquired an extraordinary amount of what was viewed at the time as wilderness. In 1890, based on the 1890 census, it was determined by a young historian at the University of Wisconsin, Fredrick Jackson Turner, that the frontier was gone. Can you imagine that? What Jefferson viewed as a permanent legacy that would serve America for an infinite number of generations was gone in just 84 years.

Jefferson was America's first Westerner in a sense, an extraordinary thing for a man who never really made it west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Yet his mind ranged over not only philosophical ideals but over science, over botany, and over geography. His vision of America was an extraordinary one that stretched thousands of miles to the west from his perch at Monticello. Lewis and Clark were in many respects Jefferson's eyes, ears, legs, arms, hands—they were in a sense a projection of Jefferson's vision, of Jefferson's desire to know, of Jefferson's wide ranging intellect so much so that he provided them with a precise set of instructions even down to the point of giving them

sheets of words for which he wanted the Indian cognate. So for every tribe they ran into Jefferson had prescribed for them the kind of linguistic information he hoped they would obtain. He sent Lewis to Philadelphia which was, of course, the seat of scientific learning of the day, especially the American Philosophical Society, because he wanted Lewis to know how to do scientific descriptions of flora and fauna. He wanted Lewis to learn how to take precise measurements of latitude and longitude and distances. He wanted Lewis to know something about map making. So in a very real sense this was a scientific expedition in the great sort of tradition of scientific expeditions of the 18th century and early 19th century. It was a part of that process of describing the world, of systematizing it, of measuring it, of finding what was out there.

Now Jefferson certainly justified in his messages to Congress the expedition in commercial terms. He justified it in terms of finding a practical water route to the Pacific, which of course didn't exist. He justified it in terms of opening commercial relationships with native people, which of course wouldn't bear fruit for many, many years after. But I think that his primary objective was ultimately simply to see what was out there. So you have to view these few dozen men, one African American, setting out with sextants, and octants, and compasses and chains, and chronometers, and map making devices and journals and Jefferson's instructions into an absolutely alien world in which they were going to be farther away from home than you or I can get. They were farther away from home than a human being would be if he or she landed on Mars because there was no way of ever having contact with home once they left the Mandan villages near the vicinity of Bismarck, Montana. There were no cell phones, no telephones, no ways of re-supply, no way of even knowing if the relatives they left

behind were still alive. Or if for example, Jefferson was even still President. The world that they entered into was a spiritual world, and a sacred world. They encountered a world of native people and more than one hundred different cultures. It was only a wilderness in the sense that it was only peopled by what Lewis and Clark and men of that time characterized as savages. There were areas such as the lower Columbia basin that supported populations that were as dense as any in the fledgling United States stretched along and up the east coast of what is now the United States. They did not enter an empty world. They entered a different world.

There are four or five little vignettes that I want to describe for you because for me they encapsulate my fascination in 2004 with Lewis and Clark. Imagine this, they arrive at the Mandan villages, the villages of the earth lodge people. If any of you have ever lived through a North Dakota winter or even passed through North Dakota in the winter you have some idea of what they were in for. With no possible way of comprehending what it was that they were about to endure. The journals record day after day of minus 40 some degrees Fahrenheit real temperature. Just last week in Bismarck, the wind chill was minus 70 degrees. Lewis and Clark arrived in that land absolutely unprepared.

Fortunately, one of the great heroes of American history, unrecognized and largely unknown, was a Mandan Indian by the name of Sheheke. I want to tell you a little bit about this man because it is a fascinating tale. His village is the Mandan Village that was ravaged by small pox and so there were few Mandan left by comparison with the number who had once lived there. In fact, the village Sheheke was born in, called On-A-Slant literally because it was on a slant, had been wiped out. Lewis and Clark

show up at the Mandan Villages and Sheheke says to them, "With the onslaught of winter approaching, if we eat you shall eat, if we starve you will starve also." What a profound gesture of extraordinary friendship to absolute strangers, saying "for this winter I will link my fate and the fate of my people to you and the fate of your group." The story goes on. Sheheke actually provided them with a map that showed them how to travel west although he was confused about what it was they were up to. They didn't have plentiful or particularly good trade goods and they kept saying they were going to reach the mountains. They were not a military expedition. Sheheke could only conclude really that they were on some sort of vision quest which was the only terms in which he could understand what they were doing.

On the return trip Sheheke agrees to accompany Lewis home along with his wife Yellow Corn, which was one of his stipulations. So Sheheke undertakes his own voyage of discovery. He wants to see where these guys came from, what is their land like, and in some respects it's a more dangerous journey than the one undertaken by Lewis and Clark. In the end you have to picture this man, Mandan Indian dressed in traditional clothing in a four-wheel carriage pulled by a horse with Meriwether Lewis pulling up under the portico of the White House and marching in to see Thomas Jefferson. Sheheke traveled to Philadelphia where an artist by the name of Saint-Memin painted his portrait of a distinguished handsome man. The portrait is actually in the exhibit. You can see it if you wish. Sheheke then eventually returned back to the Mandan villages. He died in 1812 leading Indian allies against British affiliated tribes on the side of the United States in the War of 1812. An extraordinary man and really without him I doubt that the expedition could have survived.

It is August of 1805, for those of you that know southwestern Montana, you know that fall comes early and that weather is vertical and that by late August you can begin to see the snow creeping down the Bitterroots. The Lewis and Clark expedition has reached the end of navigation on the Missouri and its tributaries. They don't have any horses. The snows are approaching. Lewis is desperate. He's even more desperate when he gets to the top of the Bitterroots and he looks west and realizes that unlike his expectation the Bitterroots and the Rockies look nothing like the Appalachians. That is one of those old blank moments where Lewis must have thought it is over, we will not survive. So he goes on a quest for the Shoshone, who are Sacagawea's people. He hunts for the Shoshone. He finally finds a Shoshone band that has horses and their leader is a man by the name of Cameahwait, who later it turns out is Sacagawea's brother. Eventually there is this profound reunion between long lost brother and sister, and you can only imagine that scene. But even more importantly, for me, there is an absolutely transcendent moment when Cameahwait and Lewis become friends. They exchange clothes.

Clothing, not so much in our time, but still to a certain extent was an absolute predictor and identifier of who you were. You dressed according to your rank, according to your status, and according to your class in society. So you have to imagine the Shoshone Indian Cameahwait walking around in a cocked hat in the middle of the Bitterroots, and you have to imagine Lewis with this beautiful tanned otter skin stole, tippet they called it. It has more than a hundred ermine attached to it. This is as fine as it gets in the Rocky Mountains in 1805. It is an extraordinary object of great beauty and Lewis notes it in his journal. But you would think that he would say that Cameahwait

gave me a beautiful stole, or I am deeply appreciative of the gift, or I look nice in it, or it felt nice, or I am profoundly grateful. Lewis, who's had a fair amount of scientific training for the day, writes in his journal "I am metamorphosed into a complete Indian". Lewis understood what that word metamorphosed meant. He understood it as a scientific word that had everything to do with the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies. Lewis was more than a year and thousands of miles from home. He was by then dressed in buckskin and moccasins and he was eating food that Indians pointed out to him and taught him how to fetch and how to prepare. He was reading Indian maps that were unlike any map he had ever seen. Lewis was having that feeling that I think we have all felt when we have been far away from home in another place and home loses its reality. Where you wonder if home still exists when you are hundreds of miles from it and living in a culture that is profoundly different from home. I believe that Lewis was metamorphosed. I further believe that for a moment Lewis became wild. Wild in the sense of seeing himself not as an objective scientist removed from what he was observing but rather as an active participant who had entered into an Indian world. It is, for me, one of the transcendent moments and I don't think that Lewis ever really came home. You have to imagine Lewis a few years later near Memphis, desperate, depressed, suffering from melancholy that always afflicted him, uncomfortable in the world he had returned to, saying to the woman who ran the road house where he died, "bring me my buffalo robes, I can't sleep on mattresses". Lewis never came home.

The third story I want to tell you is the story of Sacagawea. Imagine a sixteen-year old girl carrying a baby half way across the continent and back. She was an active participant in the expedition, all the while, carrying her baby. It is common to think of

her as a translator, as a woman who translated Indian languages eventually into English. But, how could you translate the idea that salmon came from a spirit world or that buffalo were supernatural? How in the world could she have simply translated words? She did much more than that. She made mutually unintelligible cultures intelligible to one another. Lewis and Clark and the native people had almost no understandings in common about the world around them, or about spirituality, or about land, or about power or about authority, and this girl played the role of cultural intermediary in a remarkable way. She is, it seems to me, a model for the 21st century. One of the things we desperately need in our increasingly globalized world is a Sacagawea.

On the return trip, Lewis and Clark visited with the Nez Perce for some time waiting for snows to disappear in the Bitterroots. You can't cross the Rockies in April. If you try, you die. In the course of that visit with the Nez Perce, a Nez Perce Indian by the name of Hohastillpilp drew a map for Lewis and Clark. It has no compass directions. There are no notations of latitude or longitude and geography is distorted and it doesn't look at all like a Rand McNally Atlas or a AAA triptych. The map even has kettle stains on it where around a fire you can imagine someone having set down a hot kettle that left grease on the map. The map, too, is featured in the *Lewis & Clark* exhibition. It is a story map and it reflects a different way of understanding the world. In accordance with the Nez Perce view of the world, one does not draw a map showing the route over the Bitterroots in April unlike a Rand McNally atlas or AAA map, because if you drew someone a map of the Bitterroots in April, you would be committing murder. That map would kill them. So maps drawn by Indians were chronological. The other

thing about an Indian map is that it does not correspond to our notion of distances. It is about time. So for example, going over a mountain takes more time than crossing flat ground. So the map is shortened on flat ground and lengthened according to the terrain because a map shows you how long it will take to reach a destination. Not how far it is. The third thing about an Indian map, and I think that the best analogy I can make is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, it is the story of making a journey. In other words, if you and I left this hall in a half hour and we walked from the campus to Forest Park, and we walked around Forest Park and back, and we told each other stories about what we were seeing along the way, and then we told someone else "here is how you take a walk from this hall around Forest Park and back and the story describes the landmarks and what we will see and where we will go up and where we will go down and what kinds of trees there will be and what we might see along the way." That is an Indian map. It is the story of making a journey. It is a landscape that is imbued with meaning by the stories of people. It is a profoundly different way of thinking about land and about people's relationships with land.

A friend of mine, Roberta Connor, who is Nez Perce and lives on a confederated Umatilla reservation in Eastern Oregon startled me one day by talking about sacred blueberry bushes. I grew up in the northern peninsula of Michigan. I picked blueberries every summer. I don't ever remember seeing a sacred blueberry bush. They were all prospective blueberry pie and blueberry muffin bushes as far as I was concerned. But Bobbie says that there is an area of blueberry bushes on a reservation in eastern Oregon that her people have harvested from time immemorial, and that blueberry bushes give life, and that blueberry bushes have sustained her people for generation

after generation after generation. She would say blueberries are sacred because blueberries give life. It is a profoundly different way of viewing land and viewing the world.

Evelyne Voelker was a Comanche Indian who lived over in Illinois near Millstadt. She died about a year and a half ago and I did the eulogy at her funeral. Evelyne would come to see me fairly regularly coming across the Mississippi River, and Evelyne would talk about the river as a sacred powerful force despite whatever pollution exists in it and despite the construction along the riverbanks and the barges. For Evelyne that water had flowed down the Mississippi forever. It was a reminder of things beyond a lifetime, of things that endure, of things that don't change at least in the ways in which we as humans gauge. It was a reminder of power far beyond the knowledge of humans. So for Evelyne the river was a way of settling her thoughts, of getting right with the world, so to speak. Evelyne's view was that you couldn't do a sacred ceremony if you weren't in the right frame of mind. Her view was that if you attempted anything in the wrong frame of mind that you would put evil things into your work. Interestingly, I have told that story to many people who agree, and say that if they are in a bad mood and try to sew, or try to cook, or in my case try to write, it does not work. There is something profoundly insightful about that way of viewing the world. Now I don't want to imply that we in the 21st century need to adopt an Indian view of the world—although there is something beautiful about it and it is directly juxtaposed to the scientific objective world view that Lewis and Clark carried with them which we have in many respects inherited. But the point I want to stress is that in this new century, when clearly one of the most profound issues for humanity is the idea of the finalities of the planet in the face of an

ever-growing human population and the broad, big issue of sustainability, the Indian way of viewing the world gives us assurance that it is possible to think of this world very differently. When we think our way is the only way or the right way, we need to remind ourselves that there are other ways. We need to ask ourselves how we might treat the world differently and how we might act differently if we truly believed that the planet was sacred. I think of Peter Raven describing the vision of this blue planet floating through space from a distance and realizing that this is all there is. And that maybe, just maybe, this was just the position of Lewis and Clark and their sojourn in the world of Indian people. There are some answers. At least there are proofs that alternatives do exist.

I want to leave you with just a few thoughts. One is, can we in this 21st century learn to read an Indian map? Can we in this 21st century understand how crucial it is that we find more Sacagaweas? Can we in this 21st century understand that the future for our children and our children's children and their opportunities for lives of decent and good quality may in part depend on our ability in our hearts and in our souls to imagine this world just a little bit differently? Thank you.