

A Self-Renewing Engine: Jefferson's Vision of the West and the Expedition of Lewis and Clark

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ABSTRACT

When Thomas Jefferson came to power in 1801, he believed his destiny was to restore the republican ideals of the American Revolution. For Jefferson, the central force in sustaining the freedom and liberty they proclaimed was the land West of the Appalachians. Jefferson envisioned an expanding country of free farmers, united to the land by their labor and to the nation by the success of their commerce. It was in support of this eschatological spatial vision of the triumph of American republicanism that Jefferson sponsored the Lewis and Clark expedition. This vision had been severely attacked by the European theory of degeneracy that asserted the barrenness and deficiency of the American climate. It was in response to this that Jefferson commissioned Lewis both to record and publish his findings. The information Lewis was instructed to painstakingly collect was intended by Jefferson to serve the larger purpose of supporting his millennial vision of America's future.

INTRODUCTION

"Never did a similar event excite more joy through the United States. The humblest of its citizens had taken a lively interest in the issue of the journey, and looked forward with impatience for the information it would furnish." Thomas Jefferson¹

As the day of his inauguration drew near, President-elect Thomas Jefferson eagerly anticipated a new beginning for the nation he had fought to serve. The dawn of a new century often gives rise to conflicting apocalyptic visions and eschatological hopes. This was certainly true for Jefferson who had been inspired by both hope and fear throughout the campaign of 1800. As the century ended, the idealistic Jefferson believed that Alexander Hamilton and his followers had betrayed the promise of the Revolution. He also was convinced that it was his destiny to restore the ideals of republican government. The recent death of George Washington signalled the end of an era; for Jefferson, henceforth, the mythic power of the Revolution lay not in its fabled

past but in its triumphant future.² Convinced that the "earth belongs in usufruct to the living,"³ Jefferson saw opportunity in his election for the nation to (re)discover its own identity. He called a new generation of men to public service, challenging citizens to direct their various talents "towards the new establishment of republicanism."⁴ His election represented the advent of a "chapter in the history of man," the words of which were to be written in the future not in the past. As Gordon S. Wood has written, "Jefferson was inspired by a vision of how things could and should be. ... Jefferson had nothing but the people and the

² See Jefferson's First Inauguration Address (March 4, 1801) in which he describes Washington as entitled "to first place in his country's love" and destined to be memorialized on "the fairest page in the volume of faithful history." Merrill Peterson, editor, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1024.

³ This is perhaps Jefferson's most frequently quoted expression. It appears in a letter to James Madison on September 6, 1789. See Herbert Sloan, "The Earth Belongs in Usufruct to the Living," in Peter Onuf, editor, *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 281-315.

⁴ Jefferson to Robert Livingstone, December 14, 1800. Albert Bergh, editor, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. X* (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), 177.

¹ Thomas Jefferson, "Life of Captain Lewis," in *The Lewis and Clark Expedition, the 1814 Edition, Unabridged* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1961), xxvi.

future to fall back on; they were all he ever believed in.”⁵ Of the possibilities of this new future, Jefferson's enthusiasm knew no bounds. His autobiographical words to John Adams indicate the design of his presidential policies: “I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern.”⁶ He explained the meaning of that metaphor in 1801 to John Dickinson: “I hope to see shortly a perfect consolidation, to effect which, nothing shall be spared on my part, short of the abandonment of the principles of our revolution. ... I join with you in the hope and belief that they will see, from our example that a free government is of all others the most energetic.”⁷

In his first inaugural address, Jefferson gave unequivocal expression to this vision of a free and energetic nation. “A rising nation,” he proclaimed, “spread over a wise and fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich production of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye—when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honor, the happiness and the hopes of this beloved country committed to the issue and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation and humble myself before the magnitude of this undertaking.” The lofty vision of a prosperous, expanding “empire of liberty,” according to Jefferson, should be sufficient reason to overcome “the contest of opinion through which we have passed” (with its “animation of discussion and of exertions”) and to “unite in common efforts for the common good.” In fact, he insisted, the citizens of this nation were united by the promise of a common future that the land itself guarantees. “We are all republicans—we are federalists,” he proclaimed. Separated from the disputes of Europe by “a wide ocean,” Americans “possess a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the hundredth and thousandth

generation.”⁸ Jefferson's vision for national unity was thus rooted and grounded in geography.

For Jefferson, the central force in the developing American identity was the land itself, and most specifically, the land to the West. There, Jefferson prophesied, the new American nation had what no other people ever possessed: the material base for a citizenry of independent, industrious property holders.⁹ As historian John Larson has clearly shown, Jefferson equated “geographic expansion” with the “survival” of the Republic.¹⁰ The very existence of republicanism depended upon a self-reliant citizenship. Individuals had to be free from the control of other men. This freedom, if it was to be more than illusory, had to rest upon independence sufficient to sustain it. A man in debt or dependent upon others for his livelihood was not a truly free person. Accordingly, in Jefferson's political philosophy, the nation's capacity to survive as a republic rested entirely upon the extent to which its citizens retained their social and economic as well as their political freedom of action. Since, in Jefferson's mind, the ownership of land provided the best protection of a citizen's independence; a nation of freeholders—especially modest yeomen—formed the great bulwark of republicanism.¹¹

The rise of Hamilton and his federalist allies in the 1790s had sorely tested Jefferson's hope for America. As he explained to John Dickinson in 1801: “The storm through which we have passed has been tremendous indeed. The tough sides of our Argosie have been thoroughly tried.” His election, however, in 1800 had restored his belief in the stability of the American political system. Keeping with the allusion to the *Argosy*, he said: “Her strength has stood the waves into which she was steered,

⁵ G. Wood, “The Trials and Tribulations of Thomas Jefferson,” in Onuf, editor, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, 415.

⁶ Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816. Peterson, editor, *Writings*, 1382.

⁷ Jefferson to John Dickinson, March 6, 1801. Peterson, editor, *Writings*, 1084.

⁸ Jefferson, March 4, 1801. Adrienne Koch and William Peden, editors, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 297-98.

⁹ Joyce Appleby, “Commercial Farming and the Agrarian Myth in the Early Republic,” in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (March 1982), 847.

¹⁰ John Larson, “Jefferson's Union and the Problem of Internal Improvements,” in Peter Onuf, editor, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, 340.

¹¹ Robert E. Shalhope, “Thomas Jefferson's Republicanism and Antebellum Southern Thought,” in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Nov, 1976), 533-34.

with a view to sink her." Emboldened by what he describes as "our revolution," Jefferson declared his resolve to Dickinson: "We shall put her on the republican tack, & she will now show by the beauty of her motion the skill of her builders. ... I hope to see shortly a consolidation, to effect which, nothing shall be spared on my part, short of the abandonment of the principles of our revolution."¹²

A letter written to a personal friend, Dr. Joseph Priestly, helps to elucidate even further Jefferson's understanding of the meaning of his election. The soon-to-be-inaugurated president began by describing the 1790s as a time when America "looked backward not forwards." The federalists, he explained, attempted to "bring back the times of Vandalism, when ignorance puts everything in the hands of power & priestcraft." But, as with the "Lilliputians upon Gulliver," their efforts were weak and ineffectual; "the storm is now subsiding and the horizon becoming serene." In other words, in Jefferson's eyes, America's future is once again promising: "We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new.

Strikingly, Jefferson's next words returned to spatial considerations; his vision for the nation was inextricably linked to the expanse of the continent. Sharing the prophetic hope of many of his countrymen for the United States, his millenarianism was not temporal but spatial. "The great extent of our Republic is new. Its sparse habitation is new. The mighty wave of public opinion that has rolled over it is new. But the most pleasing novelty is, it's so quickly subsiding over such an extent of surface to it's true level again."¹³ This positive vision was eschatological: a new day was dawning. The republican ideas of the Revolution had triumphed and the nation was poised to claim the wide open spaces north and south and west, from the Atlantic shores to the Pacific.

Therefore, while others, such as George Washington, were fearful of rapid Western expansion, Jefferson possessed great confidence in the responsible and mature behavior of

liberated settlers. Indeed, for Jefferson, as Harold Hellenbrand has argued, "the West spatialized solutions to a whole spectrum of problems in the existing States."¹⁴ "With lands enough to employ an infinite number of people in their cultivation," Jefferson predicted, the new republic could anticipate a happy agrarian future.¹⁵ Historian Joseph Ellis has compared Jefferson's view of the West to that of modern expectations for technology: as endlessly renewable and boundlessly prolific. Unlike Frederick Jackson Turner who saw the American West as a "safety valve," for Jefferson it was "a self-renewing engine that drove the American republic forward."¹⁶ Jefferson envisioned an expanding country of small farmers, united to the land by their labor and to the nation by the success of their commerce.¹⁷

To further this eschatological spatial vision of the triumph of American republicanism, Jefferson sponsored the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1803. Ironically, scholars have largely ignored the expedition of Lewis and Clark. The documentary filmmaker Ken Burns is correct in his assessment that the journey of Lewis and Clark across a continent largely still unknown to European colonizers, is "one of the most superficially considered stories in American history."¹⁸ Although the expedition is the most heavily documented exploration in all of recorded history up to the twentieth century, by and large historians have chosen to allow novelists, amateur historians and movie directors tell the story.¹⁹ In addition, even when

¹² Jefferson to John Dickinson, March 6, 1801 in Peterson, editor, *Writings*, 1084-1085.

¹³ Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestly, March 21, 1801 in Peterson, editor, *Writings*, 1086.

¹⁴ Harold Hellenbrand, "Not to Destroy but to Fulfill: Jefferson, Indians and Republican Dispensation," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn, 1985), 548.

¹⁵ Quoted in John Larson, "Jefferson's Union," 343.

¹⁶ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 253.

¹⁷ See Peter Onuf, "Liberty, Development and Union: Visions of the West in the 1780s," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 43, No. 2 (April 1986), 179-213.

¹⁸ Quoted by Thomas Slaughter, *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), xiii.

¹⁹ In addition to the thirteen volumes (1.5 million words according to the editor of the most recent edition) written by Lewis, there are five journals written by other members of the original expedition. A two-volume edition of the correspondence related to the expedition has also been published. For a

the story of Lewis and Clark has been handled within an academic context, historians have assumed what one scholar calls a “chronological, episodic approach.”²⁰ This approach, modeled after the journals meticulously kept by Meriwether Lewis, has attempted to portray the journey from within the Corps of Discovery, asking what the journey meant to the original members. What has been missing is an understanding of the journey in the larger context of the Jeffersonian revolution and the subsequent antebellum period.²¹

Political scientists and anthropologists have frequently noted the critical role that mythic narratives play in the development of national identity. Historians, however, have been less interested in noting their importance. This is primarily because historians inherited their working concepts of “myth” and “history” from the ancient Greeks who understood *mythos* to be a form of speech opposed to the more reasoned discourse of *logos*.²² In classical philosophical musings, myth thus was defined as a “discourse opposed both to truth (myth is fiction) and to the rational (myth is absurd).”²³ The first Western historian, Thucydides, thus acclaimed the clear straightforward presentation of facts to be the work of the historian, and rejected disdainfully any consideration of the “fabulous” creations of “mythos.”²⁴ In so doing, however, the Greeks and many historians after them misunderstood the true function of myth. By concentrating on demonstrating the “unhistorical” fabrications of

myths, they failed to grasp the significance of those myths for the self-identity of the developing community and nation. For, while it is true that myth often scandalizes reason, it nevertheless expresses in a fundamental way the “truths” of a community’s (or nation’s) existence. As the anthropologist Michael Taussig has demonstrated, too often in the struggle to identify the “really real” historians (and anthropologists) have missed the fact that “most of our existence is expressed through the really made-up.”²⁵

Because myths exist outside of time, and thus beyond the demands of scientific analysis, proof or logic, they create “an intellectual and conceptual monopoly” by claiming to be the “sole way of ordering the world and defining world-views.”²⁶ Myths contribute to the formation of national identity by supplying the narrative by which a community or nation understands itself. Thus, to use the classic expression of Ernest Gellner, if “two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation,”²⁷ it is because of a shared narrative that such recognition is possible. National stories are the glue that holds nations together. For, as Steven Conn observes, “it is impossible to create a national identity without first creating historical narratives around which a collective sense can draw legitimacy and sustenance.”²⁸ The expedition of Lewis and Clark was clearly intended by Jefferson to be one of these “historical narratives” by which the nation could be assured of both “legitimacy and sustenance.” As leaders of the “Corps of Discovery,” ultimately Lewis and Clark would do much more than search for a waterway to the Pacific; their journey was a mythic quest “for a definition of self that would give meaning to the American past, present and future (...) to discover ... what it meant to be an American and what the destiny of America was.”²⁹

catalogue of the entire corpus, see Paul Russell Curtright, *A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).

²⁰ Thomas Slaughter, *Exploring Lewis and Clark*, xiv.

²¹ There have been a few attempts to understand the place of the Lewis and Clark expedition in the 20th century but there has been no scholarly analysis of the rise and fall of the narrative in the 19th century. See Curtright, *A History*, who jumps from analysis of Nicholas Biddle (1814) to Elliott Coues (1893) without discussing anything in between.

²² Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Press, 1990), 203.

²³ Joanna Overing, “The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective, Or: The Reality of the Really Made-Up,” in Geoffrey Hosking and Gregory Schopflin (editors), *Myths and Nationhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

²⁴ See the discussion in Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 208-209.

²⁵ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 203.

²⁶ Schopflin, “The Function of Myth”, in Hoskings and Schopflin, *Myths*, 19.

²⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

²⁸ Steven Conn, *History's Shadow* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 32.

²⁹ Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 3-4.

The idea of exploring the unknown West was not new in 1803. As early as 1783, while in Congress as a representative from Virginia, Jefferson had written to General George Rogers Clark asking him if he would be interested in leading a party to explore the land from the Mississippi River to California. This effort failed, but Jefferson continued to foster the project. He made three other attempts in the decade that followed: in 1785 with John Ledyard, in 1792 with Dr. Moses Marshall, and again later that year with Andre Michaux. It is, therefore, significant that Jefferson began to lay the groundwork for a federally funded expedition early in his presidential term.³⁰

The first hint of Jefferson's plans is revealed in a letter, dated February 23, 1801, to the commanding general of the U. S. Army, James Wilkinson, in which Jefferson requested that Lieut. Meriwether Lewis be released from his official military duties in order to serve as his private secretary. Although certainly not required to do so, Jefferson offered a substantive reason for his choice: "In selecting a private secretary, I have thought it would be advantageous to take one who possessing a knolege (*sic*) of the Western country, of the army & it's situation, might sometimes aid with informations of interest, which we may not otherwise possess."³¹ Although Donald Jackson warns against reading too much into Jefferson's words, suggesting that "it is perhaps too easy to find in this statement the suggestion that Jefferson already had decided to send Lewis on a western expedition," it is nevertheless important that knowledge of the West was the critical qualification Jefferson required his private assistant to possess. This was confirmed in Jefferson's subsequent letter to Lewis drafting him into service: "Your knolege of the Western country, of the army and of all it's

³⁰ Although the connection between the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition has not been thoroughly investigated by scholars, it is clear that the plans for the expedition were put into motion before the land purchase. See Peter Appel, "The Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis & Clark Expedition: A Constitutional Moment?" in Kris Fresonke and Mark Spence, editors, *Lewis & Clark: Legacies, Memories and New Perspectives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 87-116.

³¹ Jefferson to James Wilkinson, February 23, 1801. Donald Jackson, editor, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1962), 1.

interests & relations has rendered it desirable for public as well as for private purposes that you should be engaged."³²

Another indication of Jefferson's energetic labors on behalf of an exploratory expedition was a December 1802 letter from Carlos Martinez de Yrujo, Spanish minister to the U.S. from 1796 to 1806, to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pedro Cervallos. De Yrujo mentioned Jefferson's confidential request to allow "travelers" to "explore the course of the Mississippi." As de Yrujo relays the request to his superior, he explains, "The President asked me ... if our Court would take it badly." Apparently, although Jefferson's explanation of the voyage was benign, "its object would not be other than to observe the territories which are found between 40' and 60' (north latitude) from the mouth of the Missouri to the Pacific Ocean," the Spanish minister was not convinced. As he warned his superior: "The President has been all his life a man of letters, very speculative and a lover of glory, and it would be possible he might attempt to perpetuate the fame of his administration ... by discovering or attempting at least to discover the way by which the Americans may some day extend their population and their influence up to the coasts of the South Sea."³³

A third indication of Jefferson's activities is found in an estimate of costs for a westward expedition drawn up by Meriwether Lewis (and endorsed by Jefferson). After listing various categories of expenses, Lewis stipulated that the total cost would be \$2500. Its significance is underscored by the fact that this is the very same amount Jefferson requested from Congress in his letter of request on January 18, 1803. In this "secret correspondence" in which Jefferson informed the members of the House and Senate of his decision to send out an expeditionary force, he requested an appropriation of \$2500.³⁴ Although the original estimate is undated, it must have been drafted by the beginning of 1803 and may have been written even earlier.³⁵ It

³² Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, February 23, 1801. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 2.

³³ Carlos Martinez de Yrujo to Pedro Cevallos, December 2, 1802 in Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 4-5.

³⁴ Jefferson's Message to Congress, January 18, 1803. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 12-13.

³⁵ There is evidence that indicates Jefferson originally included his request for a special appropriation in an early draft of his regular "Sate of

is clear then that Jefferson placed a priority on sponsoring an expedition of discovery and diligently worked for its success; as Edwin Hemphill has observed, "he was almost constantly fostering the accumulation of more information regarding the West."³⁶

To separate Jefferson's zeal for geographical knowledge from his political vision for the expanding American nation would perpetuate a longstanding misperception.. Historians have often noted the wide expanse of Jefferson's interests and knowledge; a quick glance through an online catalogue reveals a plethora of titles:

Jefferson on Religion, Jefferson & Civil Liberties, Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education, Thomas Jefferson: Scientist, Jefferson: Champion of the Free Mind Thomas Jefferson as Political Leader, Thomas Jefferson: World Citizen, Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist, Jefferson and Agriculture, etc. What has not been as often understood is the unifying concern that these varied interests served. The Jefferson scholar, Peter Onuf, has written: "Our problem here is not lack of knowledge or insight. It is instead that we have failed to grasp the large contours of Jefferson's political philosophy, his vision of the future, his understanding of the meaning of the American Revolution."³⁷ Lawrence Kaplan has argued that Jefferson's efforts as a politician and statesman always took precedence over his philosophical interests.³⁸ This is certainly accurate, but that assertion fails adequately to express the unity of Jefferson's thought. It is not that his political goals were

the Union" message to Congress. However, he removed it from the public address after receiving a note from his Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, who argued that the proposal for western exploration ought to be the subject of a confidential request, "as it contemplates an expedition out of our own territory ...". See Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 13.

³⁶ W. Edwin Hemphill, "The Jeffersonian Background of the Louisiana Purchase," in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Sept. 1935), 178. Hemphill believes that Jefferson's permanent interest in geography may have been, at least in part, genetic. Thomas' father, Peter, was a prominent colonial surveyor.

³⁷ Peter Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 3.

³⁸ Lawrence Kaplan, "Jefferson's Foreign Policy and Napoleon's Ideologues," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 1962), 358.

more important than those he entertained for philosophy or science; it is rather that for Jefferson there was no distinction. Everything he learned or sought to learn served his final purpose: America's destiny as an "empire of freedom."³⁹

Therefore, although Lewis' French passport stressed that his "voyage of discovery" was "of a purely scientific nature," in point of fact, for Jefferson, there was nothing "purely scientific." Infused with the intellectual apparatus of the Enlightenment, Jefferson understood science to be a liberating force; it was upon the solid foundation of scientific learning that he attempted to erect his vision of an ever-expanding, growing, energetic, unified, free America. His two basic concerns, the advancement of scientific knowledge and the establishment of the American nation, were united. As Joseph Charles argues, "They do not show any dual purpose; the latter was simply an effort to apply, in the most difficult and important field of all, the conclusions which he drew from the former. ... Jefferson thought of freedom as the necessary condition for intellectual and moral growth and of liberty as the true soil of science, which in turn revealed and strengthened the foundations of government."⁴⁰ Jefferson's American Nationalism was thus a "statement of a theory of nature put in political and cultural terms."⁴¹

The chief responsibility of Lewis in his role as head of the expedition was therefore to assure the future of America by cataloguing the natural condition of the West. As Jefferson explained in his letter of instructions: "The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River ... to fix the latitude and longitude of the places at which they were taken ... to make yourself acquainted ... with the names of the nations & their numbers ... Other objects worthy of notice will be: the soil & face of the country, it's growth and vegetable productions ..., the

³⁹ See Malcolm Kelsall, *Jefferson and the Iconography of Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) for a discussion of Jefferson's "romantic nationalism."

⁴⁰ Joseph Charles, "Adams and Jefferson: The Origins of the American Party System," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 12, No. 3. (July 1955), 433-34.

⁴¹ Ralph Miller, "American Nationalism as a Theory of Nature," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan. 1955), 74.

animals of the country generally ..., the remains or accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct, the mineral productions of every kind ..., volcanic appearances, climate ...” It is important to note that in these instructions Jefferson was very insistent that Lewis keep accurate and detailed notes on the events of the journey: “Your observations are to be taken with great care & accuracy, to be entered distinctly & intelligibly for others as well as for yourself.” Lewis’ journey would be meaningless unless its findings were communicated to the American people and to the watching world. For that reason, the narrative of the journey, meticulously kept and carefully preserved, was critical to the expedition’s success.

It was therefore of critical importance that Lewis understand how important the safe keeping of the notes were for the success of the journey: “Several copies of these as well as your other notes should be made at leisure times & put in the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants, to guard, by multiplying them, against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed.” Furthermore, Jefferson advised, Lewis should also keep notes “on the paper of the birch,” which is “less liable to injury from damp than common paper.” He must also make multiple copies: “Two copies of your notes at least & as many more as leisure will admit should be made & confided to the care of the most trustworthy individuals of your attendants.” This emphasis on note taking and note preserving runs through Jefferson’s entire set of instructions. He also emphasized the importance of ensuring that the notes make it back to Washington where they can be put together and publish. Therefore, when Lewis arrived at the Pacific one of his first responsibilities was “to learn if there be any port within your reach frequented by the sea-vessels of any nation & to send two of your trusty people back by sea, in such a way as shall appear practical, with a copy of your notes.”⁴²

It is interesting that Jefferson used the term “notes” throughout his instructions to Lewis, for this is the title he used in his own discussion of the history of Virginia: *Notes on the State of Virginia*. As George Davy has argued, Jefferson’s *Notes* is more than a loose collection of scientific facts about the state of Virginia. Rather, “its individual parts work together; even

⁴² Jefferson to Lewis, June 20, 1803. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 62.

passages that are apparently written purely to provide information serve a larger purpose and provide support for Jefferson’s proposals and scientific arguments.”⁴³ There can be no doubt that Jefferson intended Lewis’ notes to serve the same purpose. The information Lewis was instructed to painstakingly collect was intended by Jefferson to serve the larger purpose of supporting his millennial vision of America’s future—a millennial vision conceived not in temporal but in spatial terms.

An insight into Jefferson’s thinking is found in a letter written a few days after Congress approved the expedition. Jefferson had recently received Lacedpede’s book, *Discours d’ouverture et de clôture du cours de zoologie donne dans le Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, l’an ix de la république* (Paris, 1801). Although the duties of the presidential office had prohibited him from a “deliberate perusal of the whole,” he had managed to find time (as he explains to Lacedpede) to conduct a “rapid view of its parts.” One passage had particularly stood out and it was this which prompted Jefferson’s quickly written note. Lacedpede had written, “soon audacious passengers will visit the sources of Missisipi and Missouri, which the eye of a European has not yet seen.”⁴⁴ Jefferson excitedly informed his colleague, “It happens that we are now actually sending off a small party to explore the Mississippi to its source and whatever other river, heading nearest with that, runs into the Western ocean.”

The purpose of the journey, he explained in a very general way, was “to enlarge our knowledge of the geography of our continent ... and to give us a general view of its population, natural history, productions, soil & climate.”⁴⁵ Jefferson’s next words, however, are more specific: “It is not improbably that this voyage of discovery will procure us further information of the Mammoth & of the Megatherium also.”

⁴³ George Alan Davy, “Argumentation and Unified Structure in Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Special Issue: Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1993: An Anniversary Collection (Summer, 1993), 593.

⁴⁴ Jefferson quotes the French in his letter: “bientôt de courageux voyageurs visiteront les sources du Missisipi et du Missouri, que l’œil d’un Européenn’a pas encore entrevues.” The translation is that of the author.

⁴⁵ Jefferson to Bernard Lacedpede, February 24, 1803, in Jackson, *Letters*, 15.

Jefferson's interest in finding evidence of "the Mammoth" and other large prehistoric (to us) animals has been frequently noted by historians; what has not been as frequently observed is the connection between the proposed journey of exploration and Jefferson's concern to find "proof" that such animals live(d) in the New World.

This fascination stretched back many years. Jefferson first attempted to commission a journey of expedition under the leadership of George Rogers Clark in 1783. Clark had distinguished himself during the Revolutionary War as "the most galvanizing American leader west of the Appalachians."⁴⁶ Jefferson had carried on a regular correspondence with Clark during the War, and continued it afterwards. The first hint of a post-Revolutionary War role for Clark is contained in a brief note, dated December 19, 1781. In this note, Jefferson asked for Clark's help in "undertaking to procure for me some teeth of a great animal whose remains are found in the Ohio." Always the careful planner, Jefferson instructed him not only to find "a tooth of each kind, that is to say a foretooth, a grinder, &c." but also to be careful in "securing them in a box" which could then be transported in the spring from Ohio to Jefferson's home in Virginia.⁴⁷

Apparently, Clark was unable to fulfill Jefferson's request, for a few months later he wrote: "I am unhappy that it hath been out of my power to procure you those Curiosities you want except a large thigh Bone that don't please me being broke." However, Clark hastened to assure Jefferson that he has not quit trying: "Respecting the big bones, what those Animals ware (*sic*) and how they Came into this part of the Globe. I am nearly satisfied myself but expect to be more."⁴⁸ Jefferson continued the discussion in his next letter by making sure that Clark understood exactly how important this task was to him: "A specimen of each of the several species of bones now to be found is to me the most desirable object in Natural history, and there is no expense of package or of safe

transportation which I will not gladly reimburse to procure them safely. ... Any observations of your own on the subject of the big bones or their history, or on any thing else in the Western country, will come acceptably to me ... Descriptions of animals, vegetables, minerals or other curious things, notes as to the Indians, information of the country between the Mississippi and waters of the Southern sea &c."⁴⁹

These exchanges reveal the genesis of Jefferson's vision for a journey of Western exploration. They also show just as clearly the intimate connection in Jefferson's mind between the goal of the journey and the discovery of (the bones of) large animals on the American continent. As he explained to Michaux in his instructions for a later ill-fated attempt: "Under the head of Animal history, that of the Mammoth is particularly recommended to your enquiries."⁵⁰ Of course, Jefferson was not simply interested in large animals; as he made clear to Clark, he desired knowledge about the entire natural world of the American west.

As the idea for the journey developed in Jefferson's mind, the list of particulars likewise expanded. In 1793, Andre Michaux was commissioned by the American Philosophical Society (of which Jefferson was the President) to undertake the journey. As with Clark, emphasis was placed on the gathering of information "of the geography of the said country, its inhabitants, soil, climate, animals, vegetables & minerals & other circumstances of note." Unlike Jefferson's correspondence with Clark that was essentially a private affair, the purpose of Michaux's expedition was quite public. An announcement of the proposed expedition stated: "We, the subscribers, desirous of obtaining for ourselves relative to the land we live on, and of communicating to the world, information so interesting to curiosity, to science, & to the future prospects of mankind, promise for ourselves, our heirs, exrs. & admrs. that we will pay to the sd. Andrew Michaux, or

⁴⁶ Landon Jones, *William Clark and the Shaping of the West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 31.

⁴⁷ Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, December 19, 1781. Julian Boyd, editor, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 6* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 139.

⁴⁸ Clark to Jefferson, February 20, 1782. Boyd, editor, *Papers*, 159.

⁴⁹ Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, November 26, 1782. Boyd, editor, *Papers*, 204. See also Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, January 6, 1783. Boyd, editor, *Papers*, 218-19.

⁵⁰ Jefferson to Andre Michaux, April 30, 1793. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 669.

his assigns the sums herein affixed to our names respectively.”⁵¹

What was implicit in Jefferson's correspondence with Clark was now explicitly stated. The proposed journey was not to be a disinterested pursuit of scientific/geographic knowledge; rather it was central to Jefferson's desire to write (through the actions of those he commissioned) a unifying positive narrative of natural growth and national unity. As a “natural philosopher,” Jefferson expected to prove the greatness of America through the revelation of its natural wonders. Like many intellectuals of his day, Jefferson considered each natural object to be a link in a progressive chain. Beginning with simple objects, such as rocks or mineral deposits, this chain, step by step, led to the highest form of life, human beings.⁵² Jefferson believed the apex of this natural development to be republican democracy; he also believed that every rock and mineral deposit, every plant and animal, from the smallest to the largest (the Mammoth) confirmed his faith in the American experiment. The future prospects of humankind could be assured only through the discovery and subsequent communication to the world of America's natural greatness.

The tenacity with which Jefferson pursued his goal can only be truly understood in light of the strong challenge to this positive view of America's greatness that had been leveled by the European natural philosopher, Count Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon, in his 44-volume *Historie naturelle* (1749). Buffon, considered to be the greatest scientist of the 18th century, argued that the New World was incapable of supporting advanced life, either human or biological. Arguing on the basis of “natural development,” he posited the New World to be deficient to the Old. The conditions for animals and human life were unfavorable and inhibited their development. America was not at the apex of natural development; it did not represent Europe's future but its long-forgotten past. Significantly, the final “proof” that Buffon offered was the smaller size of the animals that roamed the continent. The absence of a “Mammoth” or similarly large animal was

⁵¹ Agreement of Subscribers to Andre Michaux's Expedition, January 22, 1793. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 668-69.

⁵² Abraham Davidson, “Catastrophism and Peale's Mammoth,” in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn, 1969), 627.

conclusive evidence of America's deficient state.

Even though it was supported by poor research (Buffon had never been to America and relied on second hand reports for his information), the theory of natural degeneracy was very attractive to Europeans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Its thesis reappeared in many places: in journals of exploration, histories of nations, political literature, and even scientific accounts of natural history.⁵³ For example, Abbe Clavigero in his *History of Mexico* (1787) wrote:

*America has been in general and is at present a very barren country, in which all the plants of Europe have degenerated, except those which are aquatic and succulent. ... Its climate is extremely unfavorable to the greater part of quadrupeds and most of all pernicious to men, who are degenerated, debilitated and vitiated in a surprising manner in all the parts of their organization.*⁵⁴

Corneille de Paux, a popular “historian” during the latter part of the 18th century, adopted a similar position: “The ruin of that world is still imprinted on the inhabitants. They are a species of men degraded and degenerated in their natural constitution, in their stature, in their way of life and in their understandings, which have made so little progress in all the arts of civilizations.”⁵⁵ A British historian, William Robertson, had also agreed: “The Americans, perhaps from that coldness and insensibility which has been considered as peculiar to their constitution, add neglect and harshness to contempt. ... Thus the first institution of social life is perverted.”⁵⁶ His conclusion was strikingly similar to that of Buffon:

The principle of life seems to have been less active and vigorous there, than in the ancient continent. Notwithstanding the vast extent of America, and the variety of its climates, the

⁵³ Ralph Miller, “American Nationalism,” 75.

⁵⁴ Francisco Saverio, Abbe Clavigero, *History of Mexico*, translated by Charles Cullen (Richmond, VA: W. Pritchard, 1806), 146-147.

⁵⁵ Guillaume Thomas Francois, Abbe Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (Edinburgh: S. Doig, 1792), V, 243-45.

⁵⁶ William Robertson, *History of America* (London: A. Strahan, 1803), II, 233-34.

*different species of animals peculiar to it are much fewer in proportion, than those of the other hemisphere ... Nature was not only less prolific in the New World, but she appears likewise to have been less vigorous in her productions. The animals originally belonging to this quarter of the globe appears to be of an inferior race, neither so robust, nor so fierce, as those of the other continent. America gives birth to no creature of such bulk as to be compared with the elephant or rhinoceros, or that equals the lion and tiger in strength and ferocity.*⁵⁷

It was because these testimonies directly attacked his vision for America that Jefferson opposed them. If they were correct, then his hope for the Republic was ill advised, his vision of the future doomed to failure. Jefferson's political ideals necessitated geographical expansion; if America was to be the land he envisioned, it was essential that the generations yet to be born be given land to cultivate. If, as Buffon suggested, the land was incapable of sustaining fruitful vegetation and an expanding population, then everything Jefferson's faith and hope in the future was nothing more than an illusive dream. Again, we return to the significance of geography. The question of America's future was rooted in the land: was it capable of sustaining an advanced civilization? For Jefferson, this question was pre-eminently important. The mythic narrative he hoped to write depended on its answer.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Jefferson devoted his life to answering Buffon's challenge and, as he indicated to his instructions to Clark, he considered no expense too great and no labor too costly to assure success. A large portion of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* is dedicated to a refutation of Buffon's claims. While serving as Minister of the United States in Paris (1784-1789), Jefferson worked feverishly to have specimens of large American animals, especially moose, deer and elk, shipped to France for the purpose of demonstrating "proof" to Count Buffon that American animals were not small and degenerate as he had written.⁵⁸By

⁵⁷ Robertson, *History*, 17-18.

⁵⁸ Anna Clark Jones, "Antlers for Jefferson," in *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June, 1939), 333-348. In her search of the Jefferson papers in the Library of Congress she found thirty unpublished letters that Jefferson wrote to General John Sullivan in this regard. According to Jefferson's testimony,

far, however, Jefferson invested the most emotional and intellectual faith in the journey of Lewis and Clark.

Secretaries in the President's house during Jefferson's administration enjoyed a tremendous amount of "down time." Since Jefferson handled all of his own correspondence, his secretary was not required to fulfill ordinary clerical duties but instead served primarily as an unofficial aide in dealing with Congress and entertaining foreign diplomats. Lewis, however, was employed differently; during the period prior to Congress' approval, he spent hours in Jefferson's very extensive library studying both practical and theoretical scientific manuals. It is clear as well that he used this time to acquaint himself with the journals and records of previous explorers. It is likely that he also spent a substantial amount of time with Jefferson discussing preparations, scientific data to be observed and recorded, equipment requirements and emergency procedures.⁵⁹

Jefferson realized that to fulfill the job completely, Lewis would need both reliable scientific instruments and instruction on how to use them. Therefore, within days of receiving the approval of Congress, Jefferson wrote to three prominent Philadelphia scientists and professors at the University of Pennsylvania: Benjamin Smith Barton, Caspar Wistar and Dr. Benjamin Rush, informing them of the "confidential" action taken by Congress in authorizing the expedition and asking them for help. He began by assuring them that, although Lewis was not academically trained, "he possesses a remarkable store of accurate observation on all the subjects of the three kingdoms (*i.e.*, vegetative, animal and human)& will therefore readily single out whatever presents itself to him in either." In addition, he did possess rudimentary geographic skill and was capable of "taking those observations of longitude and latitude necessary to fix the

when the nearly seven-foot high moose carcass was stuffed and presented to Buffon, he was "convinced," although as Jefferson noted, unfortunately "he died directly afterwards." It is also interesting to note that Lacedpede seems to confirm this story for he notes in a letter to Jefferson he noted, "Buffon died without being able to make use of the very valuable present you gave him." (Lacedpede to Jefferson, May 13, 1803. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 47.)

⁵⁹ Silvio Bedini, *Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990), 340.

geography of the line he passes through.” Furthermore, “Capt. Lewis is brave, prudent, habituated to the woods & familiar with Indian manners & character.” Therefore, although “he is not regularly educated,” Jefferson considered him fit for the task.

Jefferson's chief concern, however, was betrayed by his next request. He proposed to send Lewis to Philadelphia “within two or three weeks” with the instructions to “call on you.” Jefferson then asked each scientist to “prepare for him a note of those in the lines of botany, zoology or of Indian history which you think most worthy of inquiry & observation (Barton),” “to make a note on paper of those which occur to you as most desirable for him to attend to (Wistar),” and “to prepare some notes of such particulars as many occur in his journey & which you think should draw his attention & enquiry (Rush).”⁶⁰ A subsequent letter to Robert Patterson, professor of mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, confirmed Jefferson's concern that Lewis be properly equipped for the journey of discovery. He asked Patterson to provide appropriate instruments, “a good theodolite and a Hadley,” and careful instructions on how to use them when Lewis visited.⁶¹

Jefferson realized, however, that the acquisition of information was (at best) only half of the job; it was not enough for Lewis to make accurate observations, they had to be communicated to the world. Through the published findings of the Lewis and Clark expedition, he explained to Barthelemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, director of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, American scientists would demonstrate to the world that they had now come of age and were no longer in need of the tutelage of their “elder

brethren” in Europe.⁶² The world must be informed, as he explained to Benjamin Smith Barton, that “both of animals and vegetables,” there is in the American west “a sufficient permanent difference to authorize the considering them as specially different.”⁶³ The expedition had found, he wrote to C. F. C. Volney, “information of animals not before known to the Northern continent of America.” “To these,” he continued, “are added a considerable collection of minerals not yet analyzed.”⁶⁴ It was this message which Jefferson wanted the world to learn.

Jefferson made shrewd arrangements for the journey to be kept in the public's eye while it was being undertaken. First, he instructed Lewis to send back copies of his journals and notes at periodic intervals that Jefferson then distributed to faithful friends and eager newspaper editors. Second, he asked Lewis to send these notes and journals back with distinguished Native American tribal leaders. Given the interest in Native Americans in the early 19th century, this ensured a public forum in which to discuss the ongoing success of the journey. Third, he eagerly anticipated receiving shipments of specimens, to include seeds, bones and live animals. These shipments he disbursed to the American Philosophical Society where they could be catalogued and then sent to prominent scientists where they could be put on public display. Some he even kept for himself. Jefferson intended, it appears, to turn the entrance hall of Monticello into a walk-through museum, where people could see artifacts relating to paleontology on one wall and Native American artifacts on the other.

Furthermore, Jefferson intended the journey of Lewis and Clark to be the first of many. It is quite clear that Jefferson had a “master plan of exploration” according to which the entire continent would be “discovered” and then revealed to the world.⁶⁵ For Jefferson, both were equally important. The discovery, of necessity, came first, but it was incomplete

⁶⁰ Jefferson to Benjamin Smith Barton (February 27, 1803), to Caspar Wistar (February 28, 1803) and Benjamin Rush (February 28, 1803) in Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 16-19.

⁶¹ Jefferson to Robert Patterson, March 2, 1803 in Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 21. In subsequent correspondence, Jefferson also wrote to other trusted scientists asking for their help and advice: to William Dunbar, a Scottish agricultural specialist; to Andrew Ellicott, an astronomer and surveyor; to Isaac Briggs, another surveyor; and to John Garnett, a publisher of nautical almanacs and astronomical tables. In each case, Jefferson was primarily concerned that Lewis be properly equipped for the journey on which he was being sent.

⁶² Quoted by John Greene, “American Science comes of Age, 1780-1820,” in *The Journal of American History*, Vol., 55, No. 1 (June, 1968), 36.

⁶³ Jefferson to Benjamin Smith Barton, November 21, 1805. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 272.

⁶⁴ Jefferson to C. F. C. Volney, February 11, 1806. Jackson, editor, *Letters*, 291.

⁶⁵ See Bedini, *Statesman of Science*, 351-64.

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without a method of revelation. Both were important, vitally important, for national unity and international respect.

As Lewis and Clark were continuing their journey, a young Prussian scientist and geographer, Baron Alexander von Humboldt, was completing an extensive survey of Latin America and Mexico. In 1804, Jefferson received word that the Baron planned to visit the United States on his way home. Apparently, von Humboldt was very eager to inform Jefferson of the geographical information he had amassed in his journeys; he also had heard of the journey of Lewis and Clark and wished to discuss Jefferson's plans for future explorations. Jefferson was just as eager for a meeting, and extended a very gracious invitation for him to visit Washington, D.C. As he explained, "the countries you visited are of those least known, and most interesting, and a lively desire will be felt generally to receive the information that you will be able to give. No one will feel it more strongly than myself, because no one perhaps views the new world with more partial hopes of

its exhibiting an ameliorated state of the human condition."⁶⁶ These words like almost no others revealed Jefferson's vision for the expedition of Lewis and Clark.

The uncharted and unexplored expanse of the American west contained, in its rocks and stones, flowers and trees, squirrels and grizzly bears, the ultimate confirmation of the enduring hope offered to the world by the American Republic. To a watching world, its story must be told. This story would forever destroy the accusations of Europe that the New World was barren and unable to support a vibrant, dynamic civilization. This story of discovery would also unify the inhabitants of the New by providing them with a common mythic narrative: a narrative wrought on the one hand by the deeds of her heroic sons, and on the other, by the forces of nature itself. Like Jesus who set the adulterous woman free in the Gospel narrative by writing in the sand, Jefferson sought to write the freedom of the new nation in the virgin earth of the trans-Mississippi West.

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⁶⁶Quoted by Bedini, *Statesman of Science*, 354.