

“Sacred Emblems of Attachment”: The Lewis & Clark Expedition, American Nationalism, and the Colonization of the West

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This essay explores nationalistic rituals, celebrations, and public displays of nationhood both in the historic Lewis & Clark expedition and its immediate aftermath.¹ The function of rituals and the like is to ceremonially recreate and reaffirm cultural values and thus to maintain the mechanisms of public life. On the material side, the most common items used to define and represent those rituals are flags. And flags are especially important for military enterprises, such as the Lewis & Clark expedition. Therefore in this essay I will primarily deal with the rituals, celebrations, and public displays as they involve the United States flag.²

Of this flag, the expedition carried “an unknown number in three sizes. A large one was flown over the Corps’ forts and major camps. The rest were given to selected Indian leaders as emblems of peace, and to represent a bond of union between the tribe and the United States of America.” (Fifer and Soderberg, inside front cover; and see Madaus, and Saindon.) Fifer and Soderberg do not explicitly say it, yet obviously what they talk about here are the forms and strategies of the spreading westward of American hegemony, over indigenous peoples, with the United States flag representing the ambitions of the fledgling republic.



Figure 1. Replica of the 15-star / 15-stripe flag of the U.S.³

The ambitions in question here—the colonization of the American West—are unmistakably represented in L. Edward Fisher's painting entitled *Lewis and Clark, 1804*.



Figure 2. Up the Missouri⁴

Fisher's painting shows the expedition's keelboat moving up the Missouri River, "under a jentle brease" (Moulton, *Journals* 2: 227). Captains Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and their Corps of Discovery were well prepared for the enterprise. The journey to the Pacific Ocean and back, made possible through an Act of Congress for "extending the external commerce of the United States" (Jackson 1: 57), lasted for 28 months and over 8,000 miles. Thus the assortment of supplies and equipment that had to be obtained would have to see the men through a two-year expedition. The purchases are itemized in Donald Jackson's invaluable collection of documents relating to the expedition (*ibid.*: 69-99). The records are astoundingly detailed, down to "4oz of Talc" at \$1.25, "24 Pint Tin Cups (without handles)", "288 Knives Small such as are generally used for the Indian trade, with fix'd blades & handles inlaid with brass", and, last but not least, "12 oz. Opium" at \$2.50.

Altogether, Lewis gathered some 3,500 pounds of equipment to be carried across half the North American continent. What struck my attention the most, however, was not so much the purchase of a then-legal drug as what on 2 May 1804, Lewis wrote from St. Louis to Clark concerning the items his friend had requested:

I return you the memorandum you inclosed me with remarks on several particulars therein contained. *I send you 19 small flaggs*, sixteen Musquitoe nets and our shirts—pray send down [from Camp Dubois] as soon as possible thirteen ells of the brown linin purchased of Morrison to replace the quantity borrowed of Mr. Gratiot, also the case with maps, and the specimines of salt which you will find in my writing desk, on the shelves where our books are, or in the drawer of the instrument case. (Jackson 1: 177, my italics.)

The letter was signed "M. Lewis.—in haist" (*ibid.*). What aroused my penchant for resolving historical obscurities was less the mere occurrence of "19 small flaggs" than the fact that these items are mentioned almost in passing, and in an unconsolidated source. To do so seemed somehow at odds both with the meticulousness the leaders of the expedition customarily displayed and, as we shall see presently, with contemporary practice. When I started to play around with the idea of pursuing further the issue

of Lewis's "19 small flaggs", other troublesome questions would come up. For instance, why would anyone in his or her right mind take the trouble of plowing through endless lists for a few items of worsted-cloth purchased in order to outfit a military enterprise on the American frontier of two hundred years ago? And, can labor of this kind be legitimately called scholarship? There are several good reasons for an answer in the affirmative, though.

As Elliott West argues, the reasons for the present Lewis & Clark craze go "beyond the story's universal appeal" to a "sense of nationhood". But "nationhood" or, more precisely, a national identity is not something that can be grasped as an essence or a substance. If anything, it is accessible to us as a discursive construct (see Wodak et al.) or, to use Benedict Anderson's celebrated expression, as something "imagined". Modern nations, Anderson explains, are "*imagined*" because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"(6). And they are imagined, respectively, as "limited", "sovereign", and "as a community". The first two characteristics need not concern us here. It is Anderson's description of modern nations as imagined *communities* which is most pertinent to my discussion. The modern nation, Anderson argues, is "imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings"(7). As I will demonstrate, it is precisely because the community in question was an imagined rather than a real one, that many facts have been simply glossed over, in particular the fact that the newly acquired territories were actually becoming colonies, with white Americans defining themselves as the natural and undisputed masters of the indigenous population. In this project, white Americans were able to draw upon various invented traditions, at first European, then American, both to define and to justify their roles, and to provide models of subservience into which it was sometimes possible to draw Native Americans. As a result, the rituals, celebrations, and public displays also of the Lewis & Clark

expedition—in short, the whole apparatus of invented traditions that were deployed in their encounters with Native Americans—were starkly a matter of colonial command and control, with the national flag serving as a symbol that would simply and emphatically articulate the national pride of the young republic and, as well, the newly acquired sovereignty of the United States government over the native population and their lands.⁵

A word of caution seems in order here. The purpose of this essay is neither to vilify Lewis & Clark nor to belittle what many consider a key chapter in American history. Yet the expedition's colonial encounter with Native American tribes displays, at least in embryonic form, what was to follow later in the nineteenth century—especially in the years following the Civil War, when both the invention of traditions and the rush into the American West were at their peak. As I have suggested, white Americans, in their colonial efforts, drew upon various invented traditions, at first European, then American, both to define and to justify their roles, and also to provide models of subservience into which it was sometimes possible to draw Native Americans. On the material side, the most common things to define and represent these invented traditions were flags, medals, and ornate, semi-military coats (known as "chiefs' coats"), all of which had long been standard traders' gifts (or "presentation items") to Indian chiefs.⁶ The United States was also not the first nation to give the Indians these symbols of allegiance. Spain, France, and England had been presenting them for several years before the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. For instance, when a certain Jean Baptiste Trudeau was to lead the first expedition of the newly organized Commercial Company, he was under orders to "take with him three Spanish flags, for three different nations that he may see [...] in order that he may make strenuous efforts to establish peace [between the Mandan nation and] with all neighboring nations" (Nasatir 1: 251). Nor were Lewis & Clark the only Americans to take along United States flags for presentation to the Indian nations. Zebulon Pike, another explorer of the Louisiana Territory, was instructed by his commander, James Wilkerson, on 30 July 1805: "Your own good sense will [...] direct the distribution of the trifling presents you may carry with you, *particularly your flags*" (quoted in Madaus, "The United States Flag" 72, my italics).

As regards the use—or “showing”—of the United States flag by the Lewis & Clark expedition, I have mentioned the “19 small flaggs” requested by Clark. Another instance occurred on 25 February 1804—at Camp Dubois (also known as Wood River Encampment), opposite the mouth of the Missouri River in Illinois, and three months before the expedition got underway—when Lewis drew on the Secretary of War \$33.00 for “flagg stuf” sent him by Governor Harrison of Indiana Territory the previous December.⁷ Altogether the men of the Lewis & Clark expedition brought for presentation to tribal leaders one large flag and several of a second size. These flags measured from nine by sixteen feet to nine by nine, so “small” is rather relative (see Gilman 192). What mattered the most in the case of “Lewis & Clark” is, however, that flags were invariably a part of a deliberate construction of nationhood. For instance, when Sgt. Floyd dies on 20 August 1804 in “service to his country”, the United States flag is displayed (cf. Moulton, *Journals* 2: 495). Another occasion arises when the Corps reaches the Yankton Sioux: not only did the two parties council “under an Oak Tree wher [they] had a flag flying on a high flag staff”, the captains also gave a flag to the grand chief of the Yankton nation (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 24-25). There is also a story about a baby being born during the Corps’ visit to the Yankton Sioux, that Lewis allegedly wrapped into an American flag, declaring it “an American” (cf. Duncan and Burns 217). In late September 1804 the expedition reached the Teton Sioux, and Clark again records that they “raised a Flagg Staff and formed an orning & Shade on a Sand bar in the mouth of the Teton R to Council under” (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 111). Or else, when the Corps of Discovery reached the Arikara in October 1804, Clark’s record has “the Cheifs all assembled under an orning near the Boat, and under the American flag” (Moulton, *Journals* 3:156). When the expedition arrives at the Mandan villages in late October, the chiefs are given the usual gifts, including flags (*ibid.* 210). On Christmas Day, 1804, Clark “permitted 3 Cannon fired, at raising Our flag” (*ibid.* 261).

On 23 July 1805, the expedition was under way near Helena, Montana, believing that they would soon see Indians. Thus Captain Lewis “ordered the canoes to hoist their small flags in order that should the indians see us they might discover that we were not Indians, nor their enemies”

(Moulton, *Journals* 4: 429). Similarly, when the Corps were with a band of Shoshone, in late August 1805, Private Joseph Whitehouse wrote in his diary: "We had a pleasant morning. We hoisted the large flag, and Captain Lewis gave the head Chief a flag, & one other flag each to 2 of their Chiefs, & they had them all hoisted [their flags] in a level near to their lodges" (Moulton, *Journals* 11: 287). An almost identical event is recorded on 5 September, when the expedition had reached the Flathead (Salish) nation. "[W]e hoisted our large flag this morning", Whitehouse writes (Moulton, *Journals* 11: 301); as usual, a council was held with the Indian people, who were also given the usual presents, including the customary flags. Likewise on 23 September, when the expedition had reached the Nez Perce nation, there was, on another "clear pleasant morning", some trading going on, and, as Private Whitehouse wrote, the village chief "hoisted" the flag he had been given (Moulton, *Journals* 11: 329).

On the return trip, Captain Lewis again traded horses with a Nez Perce (Chopunnish) chief, and gave him "a small flag with which he was much gratified" (Moulton, *Journals* 7: 215). Four days later, on 10 May 1806, Lewis observed that the flag they had given the grand chief of the Nez Perce nation the previous fall "was now displayed on a staff placed at no great distance from the lodge, underneath the flag the Cheif met my friend Capt. C[lark]" (Moulton, *Journals* 7: 237). The Corps was less fortunate on the Maria's River, though. After a skirmish with the Blackfeet, on 27 July 1806, which left two Indians dead, Lewis "left the medal about the neck of the dead man that they might be informed who we were" but he "retook the flagg" he had originally given as the customary token of friendship (Moulton, *Journals* 8: 135). There was further disappointment once the men arrived back at the Mandan villages. One evening, Captain Clark walked down the village to see if the chief was ready to leave with the party to the United States. Clark took with him a flag to leave at the chief's lodge. But not only did the chief, Little Crow, decline the offer to accompany the expedition; to Clark's "astonishment" he even "refused a flag" (Moulton, *Journals* 8: 304). There may have been some consolation in Clark's observing, not much later, that the flag staff used in council with the Yankton Sioux two years earlier was still standing "as [they] left it" when the Corps of Discovery passed by that place on 1 September 1806,

shortly before they reached St. Louis on 23 September (Moulton, *Journals* 8: 342).

A sense of nationhood was also a strong—if not the strongest—motivational force behind the expedition. This can be seen from Attorney-General Levi Lincoln's correspondence to President Jefferson, from which we learn that the expedition was for all intents and purposes an "enterprise of national consequence" (Jackson 1: 35). Albert Gallatin expressed a similar sentiment in his response to a draft he had seen of the president's instructions to Lewis: "The future destinies of the Missouri country are of vast importance to the United States", Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury wrote on 13 April 1803, "it being perhaps the only large tract of country, and certainly the *first* which lying out of the boundaries of the Union will be settled by the people of the U. States" (Jackson 1: 32-33). It should be noted that both documents date from *before* the Louisiana Purchase, when any correspondence regarding the enterprise, from Jefferson's message to Congress to his instructions to Lewis, was strictly "confidential". News of the sale of the Louisiana territory reached Thomas Jefferson on 2 July 1803. Yet the president held back the news until the morning of 4 July when the *National Intelligencer* printed the story. This news allegedly led to "the biggest Fourth of July celebration ever held in the young Republic" (Ambrose and Abell 40).

When on 9 March 1804, the ceremony of the transfer of Louisiana took place in St. Louis, Meriwether Lewis, who had joined William Clark two days before, was there as "the chief official witness. On 10 March, the Stars and Stripes was raised, the documents were signed, and the appropriate speeches were made" (Ambrose and Abell 45). On 4 July, the expedition was not far above present-day Kansas City, Missouri; Ambrose and Abell devote a long paragraph to an account of how the men "ushered in the day with a firing of the cannon [and] made camp at the mouth of a creek, which they named Independence Creek. [...] At sunset, the men fired the cannon. This was the first-ever Fourth of July celebration west of the Mississippi River" (*ibid.* 56, and cf. Moulton, *Journals* 2: 347-48). A year later the men, then busy portaging the Great Falls in Montana, celebrated "their nation's 29th birthday. The captains gave the men a gill of

whiskey—the last of the stock—‘and some of them appeared a little sensible of it’s effects” (Ambrose and Abell 109, with reference to Moulton, *Journals* 4: 362). However, when 4 July 1806, rolled around, the men had not only run out of whiskey but were also eager to get home. Understandably, they did not much feel like celebrating. Besides, the expedition had parted, with Lewis leading a group into Blackfoot territory, and Clark and the rest exploring the Yellowstone River (cf. Moulton, *Journals* 8: 87-90, for Lewis’s entry, in which no reference to Independence Day is made).

Throughout the journey of the Corps of Discovery, the U.S. flag was to signal and symbolize the new owners of the vast trans-Mississippi (or Upper Louisiana) territory—according to European interpretations of ownership, that is. As Lewis wrote to Clark in June 1803, and thus also *before* Louisiana had formally become United States territory, the “tribes” there “should be early impressed with a just idea of the rising importance of the U. States and of her friendly disposition towards them” (Jackson 1: 59). In dealing with the tribes of the Missouri River, Lewis represented the United States government, announcing as he did that Thomas Jefferson was the new father of the red children. Furthermore, Lewis served as mediator to establish peace among different tribes, warning them of the power of the United States and promising that American trading posts would soon be set up on their territories; he also offered them steady jobs and a secure income if they would go to work instead of war, if they would take furs instead of scalps. One such occasion arose when the Corps of Discovery met with the Oto nation across and slightly downriver from what is now Council Bluffs, Iowa. “Children”, Lewis addressed the assembled chiefs as well as the warriors on 4 August 1804,

we have come to inform you, as we go also to inform all the nations who inhabit the borders of the Missouri, that [...] they now form one common family with us [and that] they are no longer the subjects of France or Spain, but have become the Citizens of the Seventeen great nations of America, and are bound to obey the commands of their great Chief the president who is now your only great father [...] who will command his war chiefs to suffer no vessel to pass—but those which sail under the protection of his

flag, and who acknowledge his Supreme authority. (Jackson 1: 204; from a transcript sent to the War Department in August 1805, now held in the National Archives.)

Typically Lewis continued to say that the “great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America [...] has sent by us, one of his flags, a medal and some cloathes [...] as a pledge of the sincerity with which he now offers you the hand of friendship.” And, we might add, as a kind of passport, should any of the chiefs ever want to visit their “Great Father”, for, the passage continues, “[i]n order that the Commandant at St. Louis, as well as your great father, and all his chiefs may know you, you must take with you, the flag, the medal and this parole which we now send you...”⁸

Clearly for Lewis, as for other Euro-Americans, flags (as well as medals, uniforms, and certificates) were objects deserving respect because they were icons of national allegiance. In light of this particular signifying power, the question regarding “the flag’s primary purpose” cannot be determined in terms either of “waging war” or of “promoting peace” (Madaus, “The United States Flag” 78; and see Slaughter). If anything, it should be determined in terms of colonization. What Clark records as “Some little talk on the subject of the British Trader M. Le rock [actually François-Antoine Larocque] Giveing Meadils & Flags” (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 242) is telling. As a result of the talk, which took place at Ft. Mandan on 28 November 1804, Clark told the chiefs “to impress it on the minds of their nations that those Simbells were not to be recved by any from them, without they wished to incur the displeasure of their Great American Father” (*ibid.*). Clark’s reference to “them” is to representatives of the British-owned Northwest Company. One of these, Larocque, records that the captains, upon hearing that the traders intended to give flags and medals to the Indians, strictly forbade him to give them “in the name of the United States, saying that the government looked upon those things as the *sacred emblems of the attachment of the Indians to their country*” (Jackson 1: 214, my italics; this is also the only instance which Jackson indexes under “flag”, as cf. *ibid.* 2: 783).⁹

Whether or not it was as a result of Clark’s thinly disguised threat, the Mandan nation’s attachment to the Americans appears to have been sta-

ble, lasting as it did beyond the expedition's stay. As Alexander Henry, a contemporary fur trader also with the Northwest Company, notes in his journal, at the first formal meeting with Mandan Chief Black Cat the chief "instantly retired to his family hut and brought out his flag, which was soon flying over the hut in which we were accommodated. This flag was given to him in 1804-05 [i.e., 29 October 1804] by Captains Lewis and Clark" (quoted in Saindon 23n.). Henry also notes that in another Mandan village his party also saw a United States flag flying. This flag belonged to Chief The Big White, who had ordered it hoisted over his hut when he learned of the British traders' arrival, although whether this was done to inform them of the Mandans' allegiance to the United States or, as Henry put it, "in honor of our arrival", will never be resolved (quoted *ibid.*).

Flags may be "sacred emblems of attachment", but they are not meaningful in and of themselves. It is rather people who give meaning to them. In other words, meanings do not arise in things but are, instead, the result of social discourses and practices which construct them as meaningful. As an example of the many attempts to construct the U.S. flag as meaningful and thus of the belief in its efficacy as a form of symbolic capital, let me offer what is probably the most famous instance of presenting the U.S. flag to Native Americans. Searching for the Shoshones, who the captains knew were in possession of the horses the expedition needed so desperately for crossing the mountains still ahead of them, they had already—through a failure in communication—scared off the first warrior they had seen. In order to make good, Lewis put together a small assortment of gifts, which he attached to the end of a pole so that any Indian coming near could see them. He also carried a special signal of his own identity. "After meeting with the Indians today", Lewis writes in his journal, "I fixed a small flag of the U'S. to a pole which I made McNeal carry. And planted in the ground where we halted or encamped" (Moulton, *Journals* 5: 70, 71).

The next day, 13 August 1805, the long-anticipated and eagerly sought contact between the Corps of Discovery and the Shoshone Indians finally took place. It was a bizarre encounter. Instead of a band of warriors, Lewis and his companions surprised three women at close range, frightening two

of them into submission even though Lewis had “instantly laid down [his] gun and advanced towards them”. This time, however, Lewis did not say something that would not make sense to the Indians. Instead, he “took the elderly woman by the hand and raised her up [...] and strip my shirt sleve to sew her my skin [...] they appeared instantly reconciled, and the men coming up I gave these women some beads a few mockerson awls some pewter looking-glasses and a little paint.” What helped more than anything to establish good relations was that Lewis “now painted their tawny cheeks with some vermilion which with this nation is emblematic of peace” (Moulton, *Journals* 5: 78-79). Soon the women were leading the group of men towards the Shoshone camp. Two miles along that road the men at last met sixty warriors on horseback. Here is Lewis’s official opening gesture: “When they arrived *I advanced towards them with the flag*, leaving my gun with the party about 50 paces behind me” (Moulton, *Journals* 5: 79, my italics).

The encounter between Lewis and his men and the Shoshone Indians has found a lasting representation through Montana artist Charles Russell, whose historical canvas of 1918 shows Lewis, who has left his gun behind with two of his men, has planted the Stars and Stripes, and is now advancing toward the Shoshone chief.

Lewis’s courageous ploy worked and, as the captain notes in his journal, the chief was much pleased and in a little while everyone was “all carressed and besmeared with their grease and paint until I was heartily tired of the national hug” (Moulton, *Journals* 5: 79). The narrative of the day goes on with the Indians sitting down in a circle for a ceremonial greeting during which Chief Cameahwait makes a short speech and Lewis, almost comical in his gesture, “gave him the flag which I informed him was an emblem of peace among whitemen and now that it had been received by him it was to be respected as the bond of union between us” (Jackson 1: 205; Moulton, *Journals* 5: 79-80).

The bonds that were established as it were “under the flag” sometimes articulated themselves in quite unexpected, albeit hoped-for forms. For instance, Lewis & Clark also gave a U.S. flag to the Cayuse Indians, calling it a flag of peace. Some time after the expedition had left, one member of



Figure 3. *Meeting the Shoshone*¹⁰

the Cayuse nation took the flag to a trading rendezvous, where he planted it "by a party of Cyuses and Wallawallas, with the result of a permanent peace with the Shoshones [who had long been enemies of the Cayuse]" (quoted in Saindon 25, from the narrative of Commander Charles Wilkes). Yet the nuances of political meaning, such as the "the attachment of the Indians to their [the Americans'] country" or the "bond of union" Lewis mentions in his negotiations with the Shoshone, did not always translate. "When you accept his [the Great Father's] flag and medal", Lewis told the Teton Sioux in late summer of 1804, "you accept therewith his hand of friendship, which will never be withdrawn from your nation as long as you continue to follow the councils which he may command his chiefs to give you" (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 118). The Tetons were well aware that for their visitors the flags were objects of reverence and thus, respectfully, displayed two Spanish flags in the Corps of Discovery's honor, along with "the [United States] Flag we gave them in front of the Grand Chief" (*ibid.*;

and see Gilman 101). Communication with the Teton Sioux seems to have been particularly complicated throughout. In a journal entry of 28 September 1804, Clark writes about some friction with their chiefs which may have originated from their insisting on getting “a flag & tobacco which we refused to give”. Clark eventually gave them some tobacco, but the chiefs still would not get off the boat. Finally a man rode up the bank and was brought on board by the officers. “[B]y him [the son of a chief] we sent a talk to the nation, explanatory of our *hoisting the red flag under the white*, [on the keelboat,] if they were for Peace Stay at home and doe as we had Derected them and if they were for war or deturmined to attempt to Stop us, we were ready to defend our Selves” (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 124, my italics).

What the episode with the Teton Sioux tells us is that given the right ‘explanation’ of the United States flag, that is, a knowledge of its code, the native people seem to have been quite capable of making sense of the national icon.¹¹ But exactly what flag would they have seen? Was it the usual flag with five staggered rows of three stars or was it a flag with three straight rows of five stars? Or was it of the kind that Henry Dearborn of the Indian Department had asked, on 20 December 1803, the War Department to provide—“about 9 feet by 6 with the Eagle, 17 Stars & 17 Stripes made of bunting” (quoted in Madaus, “The United States Flag” 71)? Another interpretation is offered by Bob Saindon (22, 23n.), with reference to a drawing in Clark’s field notes, first reproduced in Ernest Staples Osgood’s edition of the *Field Notes*: the flag drawn by Clark represents the United States flag as having the union across the top of the flag, with the stars arranged in a circle, and the fifteen stripes below. Yet another reference is followed up in Howard Michael Madaus’s brief essay “Lewis & Clark’s Flags”. The reference concerns a journal entry by Clark of 11 August 1804, and is descriptive of a visit to the grave of the Omaha Chief Black Bird, who had died of small-pox in 1800; it records a pole in the center of the burial mound, on which “we fixed a white flage bound with red, Blue & white” (quoted in Madaus, “Lewis & Clark’s Flags” 4; and see Moulton, *Journals* 2: 469.) Clearly the men’s intention was to let all passers-by know that this place was now United States property. Clearly also, the description is of a flag that was rather different from the United States flags

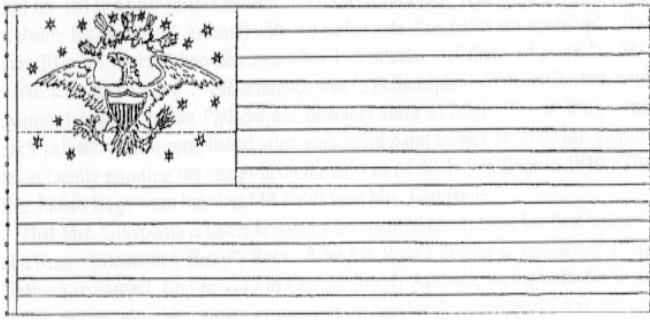
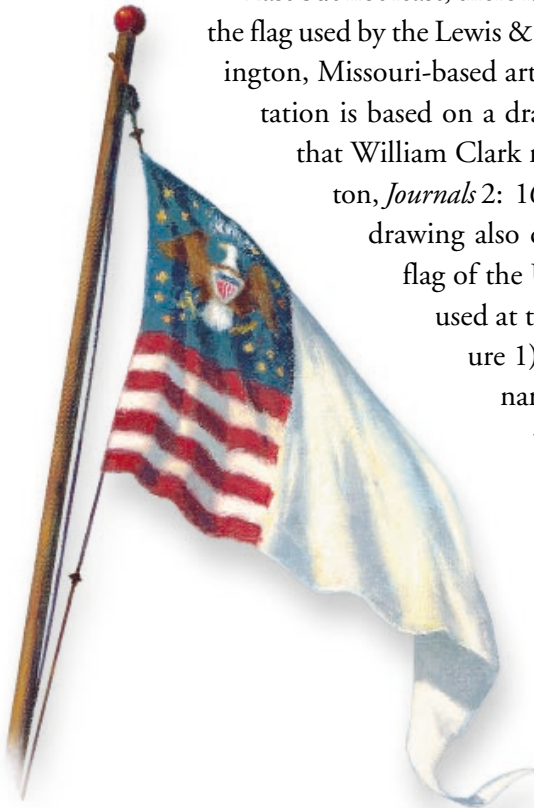


Figure 4. Typical Indian Presentation Flag¹²

presented to the chiefs of the various tribes, which in all likelihood resembled the sketch provided by Madaus in *Raven* ("The United States Flag" 72).



Last but not least, there is the interpretation of the design of the flag used by the Lewis & Clark expedition offered by Washington, Missouri-based artist Gary R. Lucy. Lucy's interpretation is based on a drawing of the expedition's keelboat that William Clark made in his *Field Notes* (see Moulton, *Journals* 2: 162). It is quite apparent that Clark's drawing also does not represent the fifteen-star flag of the United States known to have been used at the time of the expedition (see Figure 1). Rather, Clark is showing a pennant flag, similar or even identical to the one he describes in a journal entry of 28 September 1804: a "red flag under the white" (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 124). And, Lucy concludes with reference to Madaus's article about "The United States Flag in the American West", in Clark's

Figure 5. The Keelboat Flag—an interpretation¹³

drawing there may well have been an eagle in the canton. Ultimately, what Clark's drawing seems to have depicted is an Indian presentation flag cut off at the right edge of the canton, with a white pennant added.

Lucy's interpretation of Clark's sketch may be convincing; it does not seem to be the end of the story, though. As Madaus surmises, "in view of the manner that flags were made (largely unregulated), we shall never know what the flags actually looked like that accompanied Lewis & Clark" ("Lewis & Clark's Flags" 4). One thing seems beyond dispute, however. The Hollywood myth of mounted forces carrying the "Stars and Stripes" is not an adequate explanatory context for the Lewis & Clark expedition. In point of fact, that myth does not work at all before the years of the Civil War, if only because of the scarcity of U.S. Army posts and forts in the American West before that time. Ultimately, though, the exact shape and form of the flags that Lewis & Clark were carrying along their historic expedition seems to matter less than the purposes the flags served and what they achieved. Also important is the fact that the sense that people were making of the expedition did not exclusively depend on visual symbols. Language was also important in this respect.

As regards the language of the captains' speeches, Albert Furtwangler notes that from hindsight, "[it] sounds embarrassingly paternalistic to modern ears. But to Lewis (and, as well, to Clark) Jefferson was the great patron, if not the father" (114). Consider the incident of Lewis naming the Jefferson River on 28 July 1805. Afterwards, he wrote in his journal that he had done so "in honor of [that illustrious personage] Thomas Jefferson. [*the author of our enterprize.*]"¹⁴ Jefferson's rhetoric is evident in Lewis admonishing his listeners at Fort Mandan not to harm any person, particularly not the traders, "who visit you under the protection of your great fathers flag". The Indians are also warned not to obstruct the passage of any boat on the Missouri River, "more especially such as may be under cover of your great fathers flag [...] *for by that signal you may know them to be good men, and that they do not intend to injure you*" (Jackson 1: 206, my italics). Also telling is the fact that Lewis's speech was so much like the one Jefferson later gave to the Osages at the President's House: "It is so long since our forefathers came from beyond the great water, that we have lost

the memory of it, and seem to have grown out of this land, as you have done. We are all now of one family", Jefferson continued, establishing common ground, a brotherhood, as it were, which almost but not quite covers the paternalism behind it, "born in the same land, & bound to live as brothers; & the strangers from beyond the great water are gone from among us. The great Spirit has given you strength, and has given us strength; not that we might hurt one another, but to do each other all the good in our power." And, Jefferson concluded, "No wrong will ever be done you by our nation" (quoted in Ambrose 343).

In point of fact, neither Lewis nor Clark really needed Jefferson's meticulous instructions to fulfill the president's will. As regards those instructions, the president had written, on 20 June 1803, "In all your intercourse with the natives, treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their conduct will admit; allay all jealousies as to the object of your journey, satisfy them of it's innocence, make them acquainted with the position, extent, character, peaceable & commercial dispositions of the U.S. of our wish to be neighborly, friendly & useful to them" (Jackson 1: 64). Not surprisingly, both Lewis and Clark were convinced that their arrival and speeches made lasting impressions on the Native Americans and had significant impact. In actual fact, though, the Corps of Discovery may have spent considerable time with certain tribes, but more often than not they were simply passing through, leaving few traces worth talking about. Indeed current Salish (Flathead), Crow, and Blackfoot historians have pointed out that the tribes have almost no recollection of the event (Whitehorn; and see Webb). And if they do, their accounts mark the arrival of Lewis & Clark as "the beginning of the end" (quoted in Gilman 329).

While contemporary Indian people look back upon the Lewis & Clark expedition in terms of loss, some of their ancestors with much foresight looked at the Americans with suspicion, and thus regarded the United States flag as "bad medicine". This is what Alexander Henry, who visited the Mandan villages while Lewis & Clark were on their return trip from the Pacific Ocean, wrote in his journal about the Hidatsa Indians who lived just above the villages: "In the year 1804-5, when Captains Lewis

and Clark passed the winter near this place, they presented the people here with Silver medals and Flags the same as the Mandanes, but they [the Hidatsa] pretended to say that these ornaments had conveyed bad medicine to them and their children [...] and therefore supposed they could not dispose of those articles better than by giving them to other natives with whom they are frequently engaged in war, in hope that the ill-luck would be conveyed to them" (quoted in Saindon 23n., my italics). As regards the speeches given by Lewis & Clark, they may not have been considered by Indian people as conveying *bad medicine*, although more often than not they did not make much sense, were confused or fleetingly entertaining. And the Indians themselves would at any one time have much preferred rifles, lead, and powder over flags and other gifts—which is what they were occasionally given and, as well, what Secretary of War Henry Dearborn ordered James S. Swearingen to do: "Sir, [...] You will select for each of the Chiefs at Pittsburgh, a musket, in good repair, and deliver each one pound of powder & forty balls, with three flints."¹⁵

Yet notwithstanding both the Indian people's preferences and the Secretary of War's insightful (if not foresightful) orders, on 16 July 1817, William Clark, who was then governor of the Missouri Territory, was informed by Thomas L. McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, that he was about to receive three large and three small flags, with twelve more coming his way, at a cost of \$12.00 (Madaus, "The United States Flag" 74-75). Another order, this time of twelve large and six small size flags, can be documented to 29 July 1824 (*ibid.* 76). And on 26 March 1827, Governor Clark was informed by McKenney about "one large box" directed to him, "containing 38 flags and 60 medals for your Superintendence [...] Of the 38 flags, consisting of two sizes—there are 21 ornamented with Eagles and stars and 17 with stars only ..." (quoted *ibid.*). We do not know what Clark thought about the dispatches, but before and during the time of the expedition he seems to also have had reservations regarding the appropriateness of the items the Corps of Discovery intended to present to native people. Indeed at one point he worried that the gifts they had laid in were not really "necssy for the multitud of Inds. tho which we must pass" (Moulton, *Journals* 2: 215).

An opportunity to test this hypothesis soon arrived. As Sgt. John Ordway wrote in his notebook, 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" (Moulton, *Journals* 9: 67). Needless to say, the men did not comply and thus would be remembered for stinginess or, also not a compliment in light of Jefferson's instructions, for their shameless parade of power. For, diplomacy having failed, Lewis & Clark ordered the soldiers to erect a flagpole and run up the flag. Then the men, in their bright blue and red dress uniforms and with their guns ready and cleaned, paraded to the orders of the sergeants. This was followed by standing for review by their commanding officers. Then, again in Ordway's words, "2 Guns was fired from our bow peace. The colours displaying &-C—Each man of our party Gave the 4 men of Band a peace of Tobacco" (Moulton, *Journals* 9: 47). The ceremonies were followed by a demonstration of "Such Curiossities as was Strange to them" (*ibid.*)—the air gun, telescope, and compass, which, Carolyn Gilman explains, "never failed to give the Americans the impression that they had amazed and awed their guests. It was entertainment with a message" (101).

A message, albeit without much entertainment, can also be gleaned from Clark's words of 20 July 1806: "We believe that the surest guarantee of savage fidelity to any nation is a thorough conviction on their minds that their government possesses *the power of punishing promptly* every act committed on their part against the person or property of their citizens" (Jackson 1: 310, my italics). Clark's words, written after his appointment to Superintendent of Indian Affairs, not merely qualify the value of the United States flag in securing the loyalty of the native population, they are, also and especially, a stark foreboding of the violence that would ensue over the next half century or so as the United States wrangled with notions of patriotism, nationalism, and westward expansion. Indeed some of the events that were to follow—in particular the decades of warfare with the plains tribes—are enough to make anyone doubt the power of an imagined political community as symbolized by a flag when confronted with the realities of American nation-building in the nineteenth century (see Ostler). On the other hand, especially in the first half of the nineteenth

century the creation of an imagined political community may have been a dire necessity in face of the virtual absence of the United States government in the West (see Madaus, “The United States Flag” 56). Then, as well as during the heyday of the westward expansion after the Civil War, the national flag was undoubtedly an essential force in the forging of new identities among the communing and colliding inhabitants of the American West. In this process white Americans would define themselves as the natural and undisputed masters of the indigenous population in the vast territories of the trans-Mississippi West. By contrast, when Native Americans are asked what Lewis & Clark means to them, the “themes that emerge again and again, are of the fur trade, of missionaries, and policies of the U.S. government, especially loss of language, and traditional places and foods and clean water, and precious cultural objects” (quoted in Gilman 329).

History, they say, is written by the victors. Thus for history to not be the exclusive domain of the winners, it is important that the losses are recognized. These losses, we have seen, cannot be separated from the United States flag’s role in forging new identities among inhabitants of the West, whose possibilities both as individuals and as members of a nation were the result of colonization. In the long run, identity formation ‘under the flag’ would enable these people—colonizers as well as colonists—to imagine and enact not only the common bonds of civil society but also the bondage of subjugation and genocide, and sometimes the opposition to that bondage. As regards the Lewis & Clark expedition’s colonial encounter with Native American tribes, it displays at least in embryonic form what was to follow later in the nineteenth century, especially in the years following the Civil War, when both the invention of traditions and the rush into the American West were at their peak. Within this context, the rituals, celebrations, and public displays also of the Lewis & Clark expedition—in short, the whole apparatus of invented traditions that were deployed in colonial encounters with Native Americans—are starkly a matter of command and control, with the national flag articulating at one and the same time the national pride of the young republic and the newly acquired sovereignty of the United States government over the native population and their lands.



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Endnotes

1. For an analysis of patriotic rituals in later restagings of the expedition, see Tschachler 2002 and 2003.
2. My thanks for help at a crucial stage in this project go to Edward B. Kaye, editor of *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* and founding executive director of Lewis & Clark Bicentennial in Oregon.
3. From Fifer and Soderberg, inside front cover. Lewis and Clark *may* have brought a flag such as the one depicted in Figure 1. However, flag designs were not standardized then. And since none of the Lewis and Clark flags survived, we really cannot know for sure what style their flags had. Nor is there any reference in the journals to the fact that there was only one large flag; this conclusion has been drawn from the manner in which the writers refer to "the large flag" (Saindon 23_n.; and Madaus 1998 and 1999; and see Gilman 192 for a representation of another possible flag style).
4. From Duncan and Burns xvii; the painting, the original of which is now in the possession of the Missouri Bankers Association, also appears on the cover of Ronda, ed., *Voyages of Discovery*.
5. Terence Ranger has shown a similar function of invented traditions in colonial encounters in nineteenth-century colonial Africa. On the theme of "invented" traditions, see Hobsbawm and Ranger.
6. Cf. Ewers 174; Ronda, "Exploring the Explorers" 195; and Madaus, "The United States Flag" 70: Madaus (72) cites McMaster's 1922 history of the expedition, which describes a "chief's coat" as "a richly laced uniform of the United States artillery corps, and a cocked hat and red feather". I have not been able to identify the passage in question in Moulton's edition of the *Journals*, though.
7. Financial memoranda, by Lewis, found on the back of a flyleaf of Codex P: Thwaites VI: 269; also quoted in Saindon 22; note that older editions, including Thwaites, misspell the governor's name as "Morrison": see Madaus, "Lewis & Clark's Flags" 4.
8. Jackson 1: 205, 206; reference to the "parole" is to the gift certificate which, because the principal chief of the Otos was absent when Lewis and Clark were in council with that tribe in early August 1804, was sent to him, together with a flag, a medal, and some clothes.
9. Another trader, Pierre Dorion, received a different treatment, which in all like-

lihood resulted from diplomatic reasoning. When the Corps of Discovery met Dorian descending the Missouri River on 31 August 1804, he was instantly hired and, in Clark's words, given "*a Commission to act with a flag & some Cloathes & Provisions & instructions to bring about a peace with the Scioux Mahars [Omahas], Panies [Pawnees], Poncaries [Poncas], Ottoes [Otos] & Missouries*" (Moulton, *Journals* 3: 32; my italics).

10. From Ambrose 136-137, and in Duncan and Burns 133; on the cover of Barth's edition of the *Journals* there is another one of Russell's paintings, incidentally one *without* a flag.
11. Madaus ("The United States Flag" 72) writes that a request by an Indian tribe for the presentation of a United States flag can be documented to 3 June 1777 (the requested flag was not provided); Madaus also cites a letter James Wilkerson wrote to Henry Dearborn of the Indian Department on 27 May 1806, saying that several visiting chiefs had recently shown willingness to come under the protection of the United States flag (*ibid.*).
12. From Gary R. Lucy, <<http://garylucy.com/captainslog/lcflag.html>> (12 April 2003); originally in Madaus, "The United States Flag" 72.
13. Gary R. Lucy, "Lewis and Clark, The Departure from Wood River Encampment, May 14, 1804", <<http://garylucy.com/captainslog/lcflag.html>> (12 April 2003). This is a detail from the cover illustration of this volume of *Raven*.
14. Moulton, *Journals* 5: 7; the words in brackets may have been added later (cf. *ibid.* 10).
15. Jackson 1: 307-8; Dearborn's order is dated 30 April 1806. Also in this connection, see Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*; and see Ewers for a general discussion of Plains Indians' reactions to Lewis & Clark. For a reassessment of Jefferson's Indian policy see Wallace.