Lewis and Clark

Stop celebrating. They don't matter.

By David Plotz
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The American infatuation with Lewis and Clark grows more fervent with every passing year. The adventurers have become our Extreme Founding Fathers, as essential to American history as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson but a lot more fun. Last month, President Bush announced the Lewis and Clark bicentennial celebration, a three-year, 15-state pageant that begins Jan. 18 in Virginia and could draw as many as 25 million tourists to the Lewis and Clark trail by the time it wraps up in 2006. The same week as Bush's speech, Time devoted a special issue to the expedition, 42 salivary pages of Lewis and Clark.

Bookstores have been stuffed with Lewis and Clark volumes since the publication of Stephen Ambrose's in 1996. There are scores of trail guides, multivolume editions of the explorers' journals, a dozen books about Sacagawea, three histories of Fort Clatsop, a Lewis and Clark cookbook, and at least three books about Meriwether Lewis' dog, Seaman.

Our Lewis and Clark have something for everyone—a catalog of 21st-century virtues. They're multicultural: an Indian woman, French-Indians, French-Canadians, and a black slave all contributed to the expedition's success. They're environmental: Lewis and Clark kept prodigious records of plants and animals and were enthralled by the vast, mysterious landscape they traveled through. They're tolerant: They didn't kill Indians (much) but did negotiate with them. They're patriotic: They discovered new land so the United States could grow into a great nation. Lewis and Clark, it's claimed, opened the West and launched the American empire.

Except they didn't. "If Lewis and Clark had died on the trail, it wouldn't have mattered a bit," says Notre Dame University historian Thomas Slaughter, author of the forthcoming Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness.

Like the moon landing, the Lewis and Clark expedition was inspiring, poetic, metaphorical, and ultimately insignificant. First of all, Lewis and Clark were not first of all. The members of the Corps of Discovery were not the first people to see the land they traveled. Indians had been everywhere, of course, but the corps members were not even the first whites. Trappers and traders had covered the land before them, and though Lewis and Clark may have been the first whites to cross the Rockies in the United States, explorer Alexander MacKenzie had traversed the Canadian Rockies a decade before them.

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After the celebration of their safe return, Lewis and Clark quickly sank into obscurity, and for good reason. They failed at their primary mission. Jefferson had dispatched them to find a water route across the continent—the fabled Northwest Passage—but they discovered that water transport from coast to coast was impossible. Jefferson, chagrined, never bragged much about the expedition he had fathered. Not discovering something that didn't exist was hardly Lewis and Clark's fault, but the expedition also failed in a much more important way. It produced nothing useful. Meriwether Lewis was supposed to distill his notes into a gripping narrative, but he had writer's block and killed himself in 1809 without ever writing a word.

The captains' journals weren't published until almost 10 years after the duo's return; only 1,400 copies were printed, they appeared when the country was distracted by the War of 1812, and they had no impact. The narrative was well-told, but it ignored the most valuable information collected by Lewis and Clark, their mountains of scientific and anthropological data about the plants, animals, and Indians of the West. That material wasn't published for a century, long after it could have helped pioneers.

Lewis and Clark didn't matter for other reasons. At the time of the journey, the Corps of Discovery "leapfrogged Americans' concerns," says American University historian Andrew Lewis (no relation to Meriwether). "They were exploring the far Missouri at a time when the frontier was the Ohio River. They were irrelevant."

When the country did start catching up, decades later, the Lewis and Clark route didn't help. William Clark told President Jefferson that they had discovered the best route across the continent, but he could hardly have been more wrong.

Lewis and Clark took the Missouri through Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana before crossing the Rockies in Northern Idaho. Their route was way too far north to be practical. No one could follow it.

Other explorers located better, southerly shortcuts across the Continental Divide, and that's where Western settlers went. Lewis and Clark aficionados delight today in the unspoiled scenery along the trail. The reason the trail remains scenic and unspoiled is that it was so useless.

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In a few years, Lewis and Clark disappeared from the American imagination and the American project. Lewis was dead, and Clark spent the rest of his life on the frontier, supervising relations with Indians—an important job, but not one that gave him any say over government policy. Meanwhile, other daredevils captured the popular fancy, especially during the great wave of exploration in the mid-19th century. John C. Frémont enthralled the country with his bold Western trips. John Wesley Powell—the one-armed Civil War veteran—made his name by rafting the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. The midcentury explorers provided information that was vastly more productive than anything Lewis and Clark offered.

By the late 19th century, Lewis and Clark were negligible figures. They weren't found in textbooks, according to the University of Tulsa's James Ronda, a leading scholar of the expedition. Americans didn't hearken back to the adventure. It was so unimportant that Henry Adams could dismiss it in no time flat in his history of the Jefferson administration as having "added little to the stock of science and wealth."

The first Lewis and Clark revival occurred at the turn of the 20th century, when the journals were published again after an 80-year hiatus. Americans were remembering the trip only after the West had been settled, the Indians had been wiped out, and the frontier closed. During the years that the empire

was actually being built, at the time of settlement and conquest, Americans hadn't cared at all about Lewis and Clark.

After World War I, says Ronda, the expedition was ignored again. University of Texas historian William Goetzmann says that when he was writing his Pulitzer-Prize-winning Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West in the mid-'60s, he wasn't even going to include Lewis and Clark, but "my publisher talked me into it."

But by the late '60s, Americans had rediscovered Lewis and Clark, and their fervor has not flagged since. The creation of the 3,700-mile Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail in 1978 made the story accessible in a way that history rarely is. Millions of people have followed Lewis and Clark's footsteps and oar-swings since the trail opened. Ambrose's book attracted tens of thousands of new fans to the tale.

The expedition's various appeal—ecological, patriotic, diverse, literary, thrill-seeking—gives it traction. More and more Americans read directly from the captains' journals, whose blunt, direct, and oddly beautiful language makes the story live. And the United States, as Ronda notes, is a country that loves road stories, and there is none more vivid or exciting than Lewis and Clark's.

But our fascination with Lewis and Clark is much more about us than about them. The expedition is a useful American mythology: How a pair of hardy souls and their happy-go-lucky multicultural flotilla discovered Eden, befriended the Indian, and invented the American West. The myth of Lewis and Clark papers over the grittier story of how the United States conquered the land, tribe by slaughtered, betrayed tribe.

Lewis and Clark didn't give Americans any of the tools they required to settle the continent—not new technology, not a popular narrative, not a good route, not arable land. It didn't matter. Nineteenth-century pioneers were bound to take the great West, with or without Lewis and Clark. Their own greed, ambition, bravery, and desperation guaranteed it.

They did not need Lewis and Clark to conquer and build the West.

But we do need Lewis and Clark to justify having done it.