

**Thomas Jefferson to Congress, January 18, 1803, from
The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes.
Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester
Ford.**

CONFIDENTIAL MESSAGE ON EXPEDITION TO THE PACIFIC¹

¹ This wish to explore the great West had long been a favorite hobby of Jefferson (see VII., 208), and as soon as Congress gave him the necessary authority, he organized an expedition, the history of which is too well known to need notice here.

To Casper Wistar, Jefferson wrote:

“ Washington, Feb. 28, 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—The enclosed sheets may contain some details which perhaps may be thought interesting enough for the transactions of our society. They were forwarded to me by Mr. Dunbar with a couple of vocabularies which I retain to be added to my collection.

“What follows is to be perfectly confidential. I have at length succeeded in procuring an essay to be made of exploring the Missouri & whatever river heading with that, runs into the western Ocean. Congress by a secret authority enables me to do it. A party of about 10. chosen men headed by an officer will immediately set out. We cannot in the U. S. find a person who to courage, prudence, habits & health adapted to the woods, & some familiarity with the Indian character, joins a perfect knowledge of botany, natural history, mineralogy & astronomy, all of which would be desirable. To the first qualifications Captain Lewis my secretary adds a great mass of accurate observation made on the different subjects of the three kingdoms as existing in these states, not under their scientific forms,

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but so as that he will readily seize whatever is new in the country he passes thro' and give us accounts of new things only; and he has qualified himself for fixing the longitude & latitude of the different points in the line he will go over. I have thought it would be useful to confine his attention to those objects only on which information is most deficient & most desirable: & therefore would thank you to make a note on paper of those which occur to you as most desirable for him to attend to. He will be in Philadelphia within two or three weeks & will call on you. Any advice or hints you can give him will be thankfully received & usefully applied. I presume he will complete his tour there & back in two seasons. Accept assurances of my sincere esteem & high respect.”

Letters of much the same tenor were written also to Benjamin Smith Barton, Robert Patterson, and Peter Stephen Du Ponceau.

To Meriwether Lewis, Jefferson wrote:

“ Washington, April 27, 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—Yours of the 20th from Lancaster was received the night before last. Not having heard from you since the time of my leaving Washington I had written to you on the 23d and lodged it in Philadelphia. You will therefore probably receive that & this together. I inclose you a copy of the rough draft of instructions I have prepared for you, that you may have time to consider them, &c to propose any modifications which may occur to yourself as useful. Your destination being known to Mr. Patterson, Doctrs Wistar, Rush & Barton, these instructions may be submitted to their perusal. A considerable portion of them being within the field of the Philosophical society, which once undertook the same mission, I think it my duty to consult some of its members limiting the communication by the necessity of secrecy in a good degree. These gentlemen will suggest any additions they will think useful, as has been before asked of them. We have received information that Connor cultivates in the first degree the patronage of the British government; to which he values ours as only secondary. As it is possible however that his passion for the expedition

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may overrule that for the British, and as I do not see that the British agents will necessarily be disposed to counteract us, I think Connor's qualifications make it desirable to engage him, and that the communication to him will be as useful, as it was certainly proper under our former impression of him. The idea that you are going to explore the Mississippi has been generally given out. It satisfies public curiosity, and masks sufficiently the real destination. I shall be glad to hear from you, as soon after your arrival at Philadelphia as you can form an idea when you will leave, and when be here. Accept assurances of my constant & sincere affection.”

“ *Instructions to Lewis.*

“To Merryweather Lewis, Esq., Captain of the 1st Regiment of Infantry of the United States of America.

“Your situation as Secretary of the President of the United States has made you acquainted with the objects of my confidential message of Jan. 18, 1803, to the legislature. You have seen the act they passed, which, tho' expressed in general terms, was meant to sanction those objects, and you are appointed to carry them into execution.

“Instruments for ascertaining by celestial observations the geography of the country thro' which you will pass, have been already provided. Light articles for barter, & presents among the Indians, arms for your attendants, say for from 10 to 12 men, boats, tents, & other travelling apparatus, with ammunition, medicine, surgical instruments & provision you will have prepared with such aids as the Secretary at War can yield in his department; & from him also you will receive authority to engage among our troops, by voluntary agreement, the number of attendants above mentioned, over whom you, as their commanding officer are invested with all the powers the laws give in such a case.

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“As your movements while within the limits of the U. S. will be better directed by occasional communications, adapted to circumstances as they arise, they will not be noticed here. What follows will respect your proceedings after your departure from the U. S.

“Your mission has been communicated to the Ministers here from France, Spain, & Great Britain, and through them to their governments: and such assurances given them as to it's objects as we trust will satisfy them. The country of Louisiana having been ceded by Spain to France, the passport you have from the Minister of France, the representative of the present sovereign of the country, will be a protection with all it's subjects: And that from the Minister of England will entitle you to the friendly aid of any traders of that allegiance with whom you may happen to meet.

“The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by it's course & communication with the water of the Pacific Ocean may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce.

“Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take observations of latitude and longitude at all remarkable points on the river, & especially at the mouths of rivers, at rapids, at islands & other places & objects distinguished by such natural marks & characters of a durable kind, as that they may with certainty be recognized hereafter. The courses of the river between these points of observation may be supplied by the compass, the log-line & by time, corrected by the observations themselves. The variations of the compass too, in different places should be noticed.

“The interesting points of the portage between the heads of the Missouri & the water offering the best communication with the Pacific Ocean should be fixed by observation & the course of that water to the ocean, in the same manner as that of the Missouri.

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“Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy to be entered distinctly, & intelligibly for others as well as yourself, to comprehend all the elements necessary, with the aid of the usual tables to fix the latitude & longitude of the places at which they were taken, & are to be rendered to the war office, for the purpose of having the calculations made concurrently by proper persons within the U. S. Several copies of these as well as of your other notes, should be made at leisure times & put into the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants, to guard by multiplying them against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed. A further guard would be that one of these copies be written on the paper of the birch, as less liable to injury from damp than common paper.

“The commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, renders a knolege of these people important. You will therefore endeavor to make yourself acquainted, as far as a diligent pursuit of your journey shall admit,

with the names of the nations & their numbers;

the extent & limits of their possessions:

their relations with other tribes or nations;

their language, traditions, monuments;

their ordinary occupations in agriculture, fishing, hunting, war, arts, & the implements for these;

their food, clothing, & domestic accommodations;

the diseases prevalent among them, & the remedies they use;

moral and physical circumstance which distinguish them from the tribes they know;

peculiarities in their laws, customs & dispositions;

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and articles of commerce they may need or furnish & to what extent.

“And considering the interest which every nation has in extending & strengthening the authority of reason & justice among the people around them, it will be useful to acquire what knolege you can of the state of morality, religion & information among them, as it may better enable those who endeavor to civilize & instruct them, to adapt their measures to the existing notions & practises of those on whom they are to operate.

“Other objects worthy of notice will be

the soil & face of the country, its growth & vegetable productions especially those not of the U. S.

the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U. S.

The remains & accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct;

the mineral productions of every kind; but more particularly metals, limestone, pit coal & saltpetre; salines & mineral waters, noting the temperature of the last & such circumstances as may indicate their character; volcanic appearances; climate as characterized by the thermometer, by the proportion of rainy, cloudy & clear days, by lightening, hail, snow, ice, by the access & recess of frost, by the winds, prevailing at different seasons, the dates at which particular plants put forth or lose their flowers, or leaf, times of appearance of particular birds, reptiles or insects.

“Altho' your route will be along the channel of the Missouri, yet you will endeavor to inform yourself by inquiry, of the character and extent of the country watered by its branches, and especially on it's southern side. The north river or Rio Bravo which runs into the gulph of Mexico, and the north river, or Rio colorado, which runs into the gulph of California, are understood to be the principal streams heading opposite to the waters of the Missouri, & running Southwardly. Whether the dividing grounds between the Missouri & them are

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mountains or flatlands, what are their distance from the Missouri, the character of the intermediate country, & the people inhabiting it, are worthy of particular enquiry. The northern waters of the Missouri are less to be enquired after, because they have been ascertained to a considerable degree, and are still in a course of ascertainment by English traders & travellers. But if you can learn anything certain of the most northern source of the Mississippi, & of it's position relative to the lake of the woods, it will be interesting to us. Some account too of the path of the Canadian traders from the Mississippi, at the mouth of the Ouisconsin river, to where it strikes the Missouri and of the soil and rivers in it's course, is desirable.

“In all your intercourse with the natives treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their own 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, & of our dispositions to a commercial intercourse with them; confer with them on the points most convenient as mutual emporiums, & the articles of most desirable interchange for them & us. If a few of their influential chiefs, within practicable distance, wish to visit us, arrange such a visit with them, and furnish them with authority to call on our officers, on their entering the U. S. to have them conveyed to this place at the public expense. If any of them should wish to have some of their young people brought up with us, & taught such arts as may be useful to them, we will receive, instruct & take care of them. Such a mission, whether of influential chiefs, or of young people, would give some security to your own party. Carry with you some matter of the kine-pox, inform those of them with whom you may be of it's efficacy as a preservative from the small-pox; and instruct & encourage them in the use of it. This may be especially done wherever you may winter.

“As it is impossible for us to foresee in what manner you will be received by those people, whether with hospitality or hostility, so is it impossible to prescribe the exact degree of perseverance with which you are to pursue your journey. We value too much the lives of

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citizens to offer them to probably destruction. Your numbers will be sufficient to secure you against the unauthorized opposition of individuals, or of small parties: but if a superior force, authorized or not authorized, by a nation, should be arrayed against your further passage, & inflexibly determined to arrest it, you must decline it's further pursuit, & return. In the loss of yourselves, we should lose also the information you will have acquired. By returning safely with that, you may enable us to renew the essay with better calculated means. To your own discretion therefore must be left the degree of danger you may risk, & the point at which you should decline, only saying we wish you to err on the side of your safety, & to bring back your party safe, even if it be with less information.

“As far up the Missouri as the white settlements extend, an intercourse will probably be found to exist between them and the Spanish posts at St. Louis, opposite Cahokia, or Ste. Genevieve opposite Kaskaskia. From still farther up the river, the traders may furnish a conveyance for letters. Beyond that you may perhaps be able to engage Indians to bring letters for the government to Cahokia or Kaskaskia on promising that they shall there receive such special compensation as you shall have stipulated with them. Avail yourself of these means to communicate to us at seasonable intervals a copy of your journal, notes & observations of every kind, putting into cipher whatever might do injury if betrayed.

“Should you reach the Pacific Ocean inform yourself of the circumstances which may decide whether the furs of those parts may not be collected as advantageously at the head of the Missouri (convenient as is supposed to the waters of the Colorado & Oregon or Columbia) as at Nootka Sound or any other point of that coast; & that trade be consequently conducted through the Missouri & U. S. more beneficially than by the circumnavigation now practised.

“On your arrival on that coast endeavor to learn if there be any port within your reach frequented by the sea-vessels of any nation, and to send two of your trusted people back by sea, in such way as shall appear practicable, with a copy of your notes. And should you be of opinion that the return of your party by the way they went will be eminently

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dangerous, then ship the whole, & return by sea by way of Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope, as you shall be able. As you will be without money, clothes or provisions, you must endeavor to use the credit of the U. S. to obtain them; for which purpose open letters of credit shall be furnished you authorizing you to draw on the Executive of the U. S. or any of its officers in any part of the world, in which drafts can be disposed of, and to apply with our recommendations to the consuls, agents, merchants or citizens of any nation with which we have intercourse, assuring them in our name that any aids they may furnish you, shall be honorably repaid and on demand. Our consuls Thomas Howes at Batavia in Java, William Buchanan of the Isles of France and Bourbon & John Elmslie at the Cape of Good Hope will be able to supply your necessities by drafts on us.

“Should you find it safe to return by the way you go, after sending two of your party round by sea, or with your whole party, if no conveyance by sea can be found, do so; making such observations on your return as may serve to supply, correct or confirm those made on your outward journey.

“In re-entering the U. S. and reaching a place of safety, discharge any of your attendants who may desire & deserve it: procuring for them immediate payment of all arrears of pay & cloathing which may have incurred since their departure & assure them that they shall be recommended to the liberality of the Legislature for the grant of a souldier's portion of land each, as proposed in my message to Congress: & repair yourself with your papers to the seat of government.

“To provide, on the accident of your death, against anarchy, dispersion & the consequent danger to your party, and total failure of the enterprise, you are hereby authorized by an instrument signed & written in your own hand to name the person among them who shall succeed to the command on your decease, & by like instruments to change the nomination from time to time, as further experience of the characters accompanying you shall point out superior fitness: and all the powers & authorities given to yourself are, in the event of your death transferred to & vested in the successor so named, with further power to him,

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& his successors in like manner to name each his successor, who, on the death of his predecessor shall be invested with all the powers & authorities given to yourself.

“Given under my hand at the city of Washington, this 20th day of June, 1803.”

To Peyrouse, the Commandant of Upper Louisiana, Jefferson wrote:

“ Washington, July 3, 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—Since I had the pleasure of your acquaintance in Philadelphia in 1791, I had supposed you were returned to Europe. I have lately however been told that you preside at present at Ste. Genevieve & Louis. I cannot therefore omit the satisfaction of writing to you by Capt. Lewis, an officer in our army, & for some time past my secretary. As our former acquaintance was a mixt one of science & business so is the occasion of renewing it. You know that the geography of the Missouri and the most convenient water communication from the head of that to the Pacific ocean is a desideratum not yet satisfied. Since coming to the administration of the U. S. I have taken the earliest opportunity in my power to have that communication explored, and Capt. Lewis with a party of twelve or fifteen men is authorized to do it. His journey being merely literary, to inform us of the geography & natural history of the country, I have procured a passport for him & his party, from the minister of France here, it being agreed between him & the Spanish minister, that the country having been ceded to France, her minister may most properly give authority for the journey. This was the state of things when the passport was given, which was some time since. But before Capt. Lewis's actual departure we learn through a channel of unquestionable information that France has ceded the whole country of Louisiana to the U. S. by a treaty concluded in the first days of May. But for an object as innocent & useful as this I am sure you will not be scrupulous as to the authorities on which this journey is undertaken; & that you will give all the protection you can to Capt. Lewis & his party in going & returning. I have no doubt you can be particularly useful to him, and it is to solicit

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your patronage that I trouble you with the present letter, praying you at the same time to accept my friendly salutations & assurances of my high respect & consideration.”

After the expedition had started, Jefferson wrote to Lewis:

“ Washington, July 15, 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—I dropped you a line on the 11th inst. and last night received yours of the 8th. Last night also we received the treaty from Paris ceding Louisiana according to the bounds to which France had a right. Price 11¼ millions of dollars besides paying certain debts of France to our citizens which will be from 1 to 4 millions. I received also from Mr. La Cépède at Paris to whom I had mentioned your intended expedition a letter of which the following is an extract. ‘Mr. Broughton, one of the companions of Captain Vancouver went up Columbia river 100. miles in December, 1792. He stopped at a point which he named Vancouver lat. 45° 27# longitude 237° 50# E. Here the river Columbia is still a quarter of a mile wide & from 12 to 36 feet deep. It is far then to its head. From this point Mount Hood is seen 20 leagues distant, which is probably a dependence of the Stony mountains, of which Mr. Fiedler saw the beginning about lat. 40° and the source of the Missouri is probably in the Stony mountains. If your nation can establish an easy communication by rivers, canals, & short portages between N. York for example & the city [they were building?] at the mouth of the Columbia, what a route for the commerce of Europe, Asia, & America.’ Accept my affectionate salutations.”

Jan. 18th, 1803.

Gentlemen of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

As the continuance of the act for establishing trading houses with the Indian tribes will be under the consideration of the Legislature at its present session, I think it my duty to communicate the views which have guided me in the execution of that act, in order

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that you may decide on the policy of continuing it, in the present or any other form, or discontinue it altogether, if that shall, on the whole, seem most for the public good.

The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States, have, for a considerable time, been growing more and more uneasy at the constant diminution of the territory they occupy, although effected by their own voluntary sales: and the policy has long been gaining strength with them, of refusing absolutely all further sale, on any conditions; insomuch that, at this time, it hazards their friendship, and excites dangerous jealousies and perturbations in their minds to make any overture for the purchase of the smallest portions of their land. A very few tribes only are not yet obstinately in these dispositions. In order peaceably to counteract this policy of theirs, and to provide an extension of territory which the rapid increase of our numbers will call for, two measures are deemed expedient. First: to encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this, better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life, will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms, and of increasing their domestic comforts. Secondly: to multiply trading houses among them, and place within their reach those things which will contribute more to their domestic comfort, than the possession of extensive, but uncultivated wilds. Experience and reflection will develop to them the wisdom of exchanging what they can spare and we want, for what we can spare and they want. In leading them to agriculture, to

manufactures, and civilization; in bringing together their and our settlements, and in preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefits of our governments, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good. At these trading houses we have pursued the principles of the act of Congress, which directs that the commerce shall be carried on liberally, and requires only that the capital stock shall not be diminished. We consequently undersell private traders, foreign and domestic, drive them from the competition; and thus, with the good will of the Indians, rid ourselves of a description of men who are constantly

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endeavoring to excite in the Indian mind suspicions, fears, and irritations towards us. A letter now enclosed, shows the effect of our competition on the operations of the traders, while the Indians, perceiving the advantage of purchasing from us, are soliciting generally, our establishment of trading houses among them. In one quarter this is particularly interesting. The Legislature, reflecting on the late occurrences on the Mississippi, must be sensible how desirable it is to possess a respectable breadth of country on that river, from our Southern limit to the Illinois at least; so that we may present as firm a front on that as on our Eastern border. We possess what is below the Yazoo, and can probably acquire a certain breadth from the Illinois and Wabash to the Ohio; but between the Ohio and Yazoo, the country all belongs to the Chickasaws, the most friendly tribe within our limits, but the most decided against the alienation of lands. The portion of their country most important for us is exactly that which they do not inhabit. Their settlements are not on the Mississippi, but in the interior country. They have lately shown a desire to become agricultural; and this leads to the desire of buying implements and comforts. In the strengthening and gratifying of these wants, I see the only prospect of planting on the Mississippi itself, the means of its own safety. Duty has required me to submit these views to the judgment of the Legislature; but as their disclosure might embarrass and defeat their effect, they are committed to the special confidence of the two Houses.

While the extension of the public commerce among the Indian tribes, may deprive of that source of profit such of our citizens as are engaged in it, it might be worthy the attention of Congress, in their care of individual as well as of the general interest, to point, in another direction, the enterprise of these citizens, as profitably for themselves, and more usefully for the public. The river Missouri, and the Indians inhabiting it, are not as well known as is rendered desirable by their connexion with the Mississippi, and consequently with us. It is, however, understood, that the country on that river is inhabited by numerous tribes, who furnish great supplies of furs and peltry to the trade of another nation, carried on in a high latitude, through an infinite number of portages and lakes, shut up by ice through a long season. The commerce on that line could bear no competition with that

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of the Missouri, traversing a moderate climate, offering according to the best accounts, a continued navigation from its source, and possibly with a single portage, from the Western Ocean, and finding to the Atlantic a choice of channels through the Illinois or Wabash, the lakes and Hudson, through the Ohio and Susquehanna, or Potomac or James rivers, and through the Tennessee and Savannah, rivers. An intelligent officer, with ten or twelve chosen men, fit for the enterprise, and willing to undertake it, taken from our posts, where they may be spared without inconvenience, might explore the whole line, even to the Western Ocean, have conferences with the natives on the subject of commercial intercourse, get admission among them for our traders, as others are admitted, agree on convenient deposits for an interchange of articles, and return with the information acquired, in the course of two summers. Their arms and accoutrements, some instruments of observation, and light and cheap presents for the Indians, would be all the apparatus they could carry, and with an expectation of a soldier's portion of land on their return, would constitute the whole expense. Their pay would be going on, whether here or there. While other civilized nations have encountered great expense to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge by undertaking voyages of discovery, and for other literary purposes, in various parts and directions,

our nation seems to owe to the same object, as well as to its own interests, to explore this, the only line of easy communication across the continent, and so directly traversing our own part of it. The interests of commerce place the principal object within the constitutional powers and care of Congress, and that it should incidentally advance the geographical knowledge of our own continent, cannot be but an additional gratification. The nation claiming the territory, regarding this as a literary pursuit, which is in the habit of permitting within its dominions, would not be disposed to view it with jealousy, even if the expiring state of its interests there did not render it a matter of indifference. The appropriation of two thousand five hundred dollars, "for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the United States," while understood and considered by the Executive as giving the

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legislative sanction, would cover the undertaking from notice, and prevent the obstructions which interested individuals might otherwise previously prepare in its way.