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Lewis and Clark: Alive and well

A long return visit to the Columbia River estuary this summer by estimable scholar Gary Moulton is both an invaluable encounter with a bright mind and a useful reminder that it's still possible to find surprisingly fresh ways to examine an historical touchstone — even one as famous as the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Having spent much of his academic life studying this signature episode in America's foundational years, Moulton is better equipped than anyone alive to create a kind of literary time machine that will allow us to glimpse what the explorers were seeing and doing on each of the 863 days of their adventure.

Drawing from the expedition's justly famous journals and diverse additional sources, Moulton promises to fulfill a wish common among Lewis and Clark wannabes: "A person could sit there and say 'I want to see everything that happened on this day.' I am simply giving an account of each day of the expedition."

Rex Ziak of Naselle, Wash., another passionate expedition expert, did something similar with the explorers' time near the mouth of the Columbia. Moulton is going for the whole enchilada. It will make for fascinating reading.

This is happening in the context of HBO's on-again, off-again, on-again Tom Hanks/Brad Pitt produced mini-series about Lewis and Clark. As of last week, it is back on track, with actors reportedly having been informed about a new start date next year.

Sadly, as with many programs set in the American West, the show actually will be filmed in Canada. The spectacular Albertan Rockies will stand in for the more-populated mountains and plains of North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon. Favorable Canadian tax and labor policies may also help account for the decision.

Considering Lewis and Clark are a particularly potent American symbol, this filming-location decision is unfortunate.

Even more so would be a failure to enlist U.S. tribes as active consultants and participants. The expedition served as President Thomas Jefferson's emissaries to Indian peoples, who were all-too-briefly considered valuable potential partners, before they were overrun by white settlers and profiteers in the 19th century. A television show that will inevitably inform many Americans' opinions about Native Peoples should at least include actual descendants of Chinook and Clatsop tribal members.

Some local residents who recall the 2004-06 bicentennial still feel a certain fatigue about the expedition. But it is forever firmly part of national mythology, serving a large role in establishing our American ethos of courageously prevailing over all obstacles. We continue to be very fortunate to have this history — and the national park devoted to it — so closely woven into our local communities.

This extraordinary land is our land

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

The other day, my teenage daughter and I were idly browsing real estate porn, a monument to U.S. inequality: a private island in the Bahamas selling for $17.9 million; a 900-acre retreat in Washington state for $11 million; and an 83-acre estate in Colorado for a cool $100 million.

Nicholas Kristof

Then we snapped out of the covetousness, for we had just been enjoying a vacation on even more exclusive property, so valuable that no hedge fund manager could ever afford to buy or rent it.

We had been hiking day after day past pristine mountain lakes, serenaded by the babble of snow-fed streams, greeted by vivid wildflowers in alpine meadows. And it's all my land!

Of course, it's also your land. It's our extraordinary national inheritance, one of the greatest gifts of our ancestors — our public lands.

My daughter and I were backpacking a 210-mile stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail in central California, from Donner Pass to Yosemite. The cost? It was all free.

Most of the time in America, we're surrounded by oppressive inequality, such that the wealthiest 1 percent collectively own substantially more than the bottom 90 percent. One escape from that is America's wild places.

At a time when so much else in America is rationed by price, egalitarianism thrives in the wilderness. On the trail, no one can pull rank on you — except a grizzly bear. (In that case, be very deferential!)

Wilderness trails constitute a rare space in America marked by economic diversity. Lawyers and construction workers get bitten by the same mosquitoes and sip from the same streams; there are none of the usual signals about socioeconomic status, for most hikers are in shorts and a T-shirt, and enveloped by an aroma that would make a skunk queasy.

The wild offers the simplest and cheapest of vacations. My daughter and I unroll our sleeping bags on a $5 plastic sheet and watch shooting stars until we fall asleep (if it rains, we set up a tarp). We carry all our food. And at the end, we sometimes try to hitchhike back to civilization (although drivers mostly speed up when they see me).

Nicholas Kristof/The New York Times

The Pacific Crest Trail winds by an alpine lake in central California. America's visionaries left us a wilderness where egalitarianism thrives and bears treat rich and poor hiker equally.

Car campers often pay fees. But there are almost never fees for backpackers in the real wilderness. Instead, you pay in sweat and blisters.

In that respect, the wilderness reflects a vision for America that is more democratic than just about any other space in our country.

I can't help thinking that if the American West were discovered today, the most glorious bits would be sold off to the highest bidder. Yosemite might be nothing but weekend homes for Internet tycoons.

Fortunately, America's visionaries back then didn't think that way. People like Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot who helped preserve our wild places were personally wealthy and could afford country estates. But they understood the importance of common ownership of some of America's natural heritage, so that access didn't depend on wealth or breeding.

The wild offers the simplest and cheapest of vacations.

Their vision reflected a deep belief at the time, among Republicans as well as Democrats, in public services that transcended class. The result was the world's best public school system at the time, networks of public libraries, public parks and beaches, and later a broad system of public universities and community colleges.

Sadly, that belief in public goods today seems old-fashioned!

My daughter and I are hiking the full Pacific Crest Trail, 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada, in the narrow window in which she's strong enough and I'm not yet decrepit. We've hiked half and hope to finish in another five or six years.

My favorite area this time was the area south of Sonora Pass, a stunning landscape of jagged peaks, snow patches and alpine lakes. We found it more intoxicating than any microbrew.

Then it started hailing on us. Yes, in midsummer, balls of ice the size of marbles pelted us, stinging through hats and clothing. Soon the ice turned to rain, the trail to mud — and we were reminded that one of the great things about the wilderness is its capacity to discomfort and humble us.

Most of the time in the 21st century, we dominate our surroundings: We tweak the thermostat and the temperature falls one degree. We push a button and Taylor Swift sings for us. It's the opposite in the wilderness, which teaches us constantly that we are not lords of the universe but rather building blocks of it.

In the best sense, nature puts us in our place. Sometimes with icy toes.

Wilderness offers therapy for the soul as just about the last fully egalitarian place in America. Here we all stand equal — before the bears and the mosquitoes. And there's a lesson here worth emulating for the rest of America.

It's time to grow better forest policies

It's good to see some of the West's U.S. senators working across the political aisle in hopes of developing better forest management strategies in light of this summer's disastrous wildfires.

As reported by the *Seattle Times,* Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., last Thursday took testimony from wildfire specialists "and pledged bipartisan action to boost forest-thinning and controlled burns — and an end to the raiding of the U.S. Forest Service's fire-prevention budget."

A major revamping of forest planning is timely. Though still sparsely populated by global standards, Pacific Northwest forests are increasingly interspersed with housing, at the same time that climatic changes result in tinderbox-like conditions that are consuming hundreds of acres this summer. Some fires will almost certainly smolder until heavy winter rains begin, representing a continuing risk they might jump beyond containment measures.

Cantwell is working on a law to stop "fire-borrowing," a federal budget practice that shortchanges fire prevention and preparation in favor of other spending priorities. Her proposals include upgrading the U.S. Forest Service's antiquated airtanker fleet, the planes that can be deployed to make rapid and meaningful progress in blocking the path of fires approaching homes and other valuable assets.

Barrasso, a former television M.D. who seemed to shed his analytical scientific mind once ensconced in the Senate, is at least partially disposed toward working on a forest-management strategy that doesn't rely on a return to discredited 20th century industrial forestry approaches.

Thinning and maintenance are clearly needed. A forestry expert from Western Washington University testified to the senators that there is a 400-million-acre backlog — an area larger than Alaska — of forestland that needs to be thinned and have branches and other fuels removed that contribute to big fires. He cautioned, however, "We can't cut our way out of this."

Peter Goldmark, Washington state's elected commissioner of public lands, commented on a need to modernize fire-detection — using airplane flyovers, satellites or drones to catch fires when they are still small enough to quickly snuff out. Such rapid, targeted response could have saved lives and averted vast property damage this summer.

As communities in Oregon and Washington move past the immediate crises of controlling this summer's wildfires, the positive next steps should revolve around involving forestland residents in setting the stage for preempting future conflagrations.

Congress can play a valuable role in this by making sure forest money is applied to forest issues, and by helping the West's diverse constituencies find long-range ways to work together toward forest health.

What six years of 'reset' have wrought

By CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER
Washington Post Writers Group

WASHINGTON — On September 5, 2014, Russian agents crossed into Estonia and kidnapped an Estonian security official. Last week, after a closed trial, Russia sentenced him to 15 years.

The reaction? The State Department issued a statement. The NATO secretary-general issued a tweet. Neither did anything. The European Union (reports *The Wall Street Journal*) said it was too early to discuss any possible action.

The timing of this brazen violation of NATO territory — two days after President Obama visited Estonia to symbolize America's commitment to its security — is testimony to Vladimir Putin's contempt for the American president. He knows Obama will do nothing. Why should he think otherwise?

• Putin breaks the arms embargo to Iran by lifting the hold on selling it S-300 missiles. Obama responds by excusing him, saying it wasn't technically illegal and adding, with a tip of the hat to Putin's patience: "I'm frankly surprised that it held this long."

• Russia mousetraps Obama at the eleventh hour of the Iran negotiations, joining Iran in demanding that the conventional-weapons and ballistic-missile embargoes be dropped. Obama caves.

• Putin invades Ukraine, annexes Crimea, breaks two Minsk ceasefire agreements and erases the Russia-Ukraine border. Obama's response? Pinprick sanctions, empty threats and a continuing refusal to supply Ukraine with defensive weaponry, lest he provoke Putin.

The East Europeans have noticed. In February, Lithuania decided to reinstate conscription, a move strategically insignificant — the Lithuanians couldn't hold off the Russian army for a day — but highly symbolic. Eastern Europe has been begging NATO to station permanent bases on its territory as a tripwire guaranteeing a powerful NATO/U.S. response to any Russian aggression.

Charles Krauthammer

NATO has refused. Instead, Obama offered more military exercises in the Baltic States and Poland. And threw in an additional 250 tanks and armored vehicles, spread among *seven* allies.

It is true that Putin's resentment over Russia's lost empire long predates Obama. But for resentment to turn into revanchism — an active policy of reconquest — requires opportunity. Which is exactly what Obama's "reset" policy has offered over the past 6 1/2 years.

Since the end of World War II, Russia has known that what stands in the way of westward expansion was not Europe, living happily in decadent repose, but the United States as guarantor of Western security. Obama's naivete and ambivalence have put those guarantees in question.

Turns out the Cold War is not over.

It began with the reset button, ostentatiously offered less than two months after Obama's swearing-in. Followed six months later by the unilateral American cancellation of the missile shield the Poles and the Czechs had agreed to install on their territory. Again, lest Putin be upset.

By 2012, a still clueless Obama mocked Mitt Romney for saying that Russia is "without question our No. 1 geopolitical foe," quipping oh so cleverly: "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back." After all, he explained, "the Cold War's been over for 20 years."

Turned out it was 2015 calling. Obama's own top officials have been retroactively vindicating Romney. Last month, Obama's choice for chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared that "Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security." Two weeks ago, the retiring Army chief of staff, Raymond Odierno, called Russia our "most dangerous" military threat. Obama's own secretary of defense has gone one better: "Russia poses an existential threat to the United States."

Turns out the Cold War is not over either. Putin is intent on reviving it. Helped immensely by Obama's epic misjudgment of Russian intentions, the balance of power has shifted — and America's allies feel it.

And not just the East Europeans. The president of Egypt, a country estranged from Russia for 40 years and our mainstay Arab ally in the Middle East, has twice visited Moscow within the last four months.

The Saudis, congenitally wary of Russia but shell-shocked by Obama's grand nuclear capitulation to Iran that will make it the regional hegemon, are searching for alternatives, too. At a recent economic conference in St. Petersburg, the Saudis invited Putin to Riyadh and the Russians reciprocated by inviting the new King Salman to visit Czar Vladimir in Moscow.

Even Pakistan, a traditional Chinese ally and Russian adversary, is buying Mi-35 helicopters from Russia, which is building a natural gas pipeline between Karachi and Lahore.

As John Kerry awaits his upcoming Nobel and Obama plans his presidential library (my suggestion: Havana), Putin is deciding how to best exploit the final 17 months of his Obama bonanza.

The world sees it. Obama doesn't.