

**UNDAUNTED COURAGE:
MERIWETHER LEWIS, THOMAS JEFFERSON,
AND THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN WEST¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR BRADLEY E. VANDERAU²

I. Introduction

On 22 September 1806, Lewis and Clark completed the last leg of their epic journey through the Louisiana Territory. The expedition covered eight thousand miles over a twenty-eight month period—an accomplishment Meriwether Lewis had to be proud of:

He had traveled through a hunter's paradise beyond anything any American had ever before known. He had crossed mountains that were greater than had ever before been seen by any American, save the handful who had visited the Alps. He had seen falls and cataracts and raging rivers, thunderstorms all beyond belief, trees of a size never before conceived of, Indian tribes uncorrupted by contact with white men, canyons and cliffs and other scenes of visionary enchantment.³

Stephen Ambrose's "labor of love," *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*, masterfully chronicles the life of Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809). This nonstop adventure skillfully keeps the reader's attention throughout the book prompting the reader to ask questions such as: "What awaits around the next river bend for Captain Lewis and his Corps of Discovery—a hostile Sioux tribe or a new zoological finding?" or, "What traps have Lewis's political enemies set for him?"

Undaunted Courage is a historical account of the opening of the American West through the eyes of Meriwether Lewis. Mixing friendship, leadership, politics, science, geography, and history, *Undaunted Courage* leads the reader into Lewis's world of triumph and tragedy. His ultimate

1. STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, *UNDAUNTED COURAGE: MERIWETHER LEWIS, THOMAS JEFFERSON, AND THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN WEST* (1996).

2. United States Army. Written while assigned as a student, 48th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 404.

triumph was completing the Lewis and Clark Expedition and compiling a wealth of cultural, geographical, and scientific information in his voyage journals. His ultimate tragedy was committing suicide at the age of thirty-five.

Although not explicitly stated, Ambrose's thesis is quite simple: Thomas Jefferson made the correct decision when he chose Meriwether Lewis to command the expedition into the Louisiana Territory. Meriwether Lewis possessed the qualities that ensured a successful and productive journey—competence and the ability to lead. Considering all of Lewis's strengths and weaknesses, Ambrose concludes that Lewis “was a great company commander, the greatest of all American explorers, and in the top rank of world explorers.”⁴

As for his thesis, Stephen Ambrose hits the mark. His passion, organization, and methodology complement his support for his thesis. In short, Stephen Ambrose's historical account is well written, entertaining, highly detailed, and informative.

This book review analyzes Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage* focusing on the following areas: Ambrose's Passion, Ambrose's Organization and Methodology, Ambrose's Insights into Leadership, and Ambrose's Balance.

II. Ambrose's Passion

To write a biography of substance and utility an author should arm himself with the following: a thorough knowledge of his subject, an ample amount of sources both primary and secondary, and a passion for the subject. Stephen Ambrose's arsenal is well stocked as evidenced by *Undaunted Courage*. What establishes his preeminence is his passion for the Lewis and Clark Expedition and specifically Meriwether Lewis.

Ambrose's passion was fired by his reading of the Biddle edition of the journals of Lewis and Clark in the of Fall 1975. Ambrose states in his introduction, “I read the journals that Fall and was entranced.”⁵ Inspired, Ambrose took his family and a friend on a journey over the Lewis and Clark Trail in the Summer of 1976. Each night they read the journals aloud

4. *Id.* at 483.

5. *Id.* at 13.

around the campfire. Every year since, Ambrose has returned to portions of the Lewis and Clark Trail. Ambrose states, "in short, we have been obsessed with Lewis and Clark for twenty years."⁶

In Ambrose's opinion, the last good biography of Lewis was written in 1965. However, many new documents by and about Lewis have since appeared. After two decades of wanting to write about the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Ambrose finally had the time and was convinced to do an updated biography of Lewis incorporating these new materials. Ambrose's passion is evident in the following passage:

This book has been a labor of love. We have endured summer snowstorms (at Lemhi Pass on July 4, 1986), terrible thunderstorms in canoes on the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, soaking rains on the Lolo, and innumerable moments of exhilaration on the Lewis and Clark Trail. The Lewis and Clark experience has brought us together so many times in so many places that we cannot measure or express what it has meant to our marriage and our family. We feel privileged to have had the opportunity to spend so much time with Meriwether Lewis, and with our students, friends, and children in the last best place.⁷

Does Ambrose's passion give him credibility? Perhaps not, but this passion, which the reader can feel with each turn of the page, adds so much to *Undaunted Courage* that without it the book would have read like another history text. Instead, *Undaunted Courage* reads like a novel with the benefit of the detail and richness of a history text. *Undaunted Courage* both entertains and teaches. Ambrose's passion brings the book's characters and situations to life. However, passion and knowledge in and of themselves do not make a well-written book. It also requires solid organization and an effective methodology to convey the material.

III. Ambrose's Organization and Methodology

Ambrose's organization makes the book an easy read. But for three chapters near the end of the book, *Undaunted Courage's* remaining thirty-seven chapters are chronologically arranged. The chapters are grouped into three distinct sections—pre-expedition, expedition, and post-expedi-

6. *Id.* at 14.

7. *Id.* at 14-15.

tion. This simple structure works effectively. It leads the reader through Lewis's life and his expedition in an orderly fashion. The reader knows where he has been and where he is going.

The pre-expedition section (1774-1804) covers Meriwether Lewis's youth, his experiences as a member of one of the most distinguished families in Virginia, his close relationship with Thomas Jefferson and the positive influence Jefferson had on him, and finally his preparation for the expedition. Over fifty percent of the book is devoted to the expedition (1804-1806). This section covers Lewis's journey up the Missouri River and his portage around the Great Falls, and his encounters with the various Indian tribes. It also covers his passage to the Continental Divide, his crossing through the Lemhi Pass, his struggle over the Bitterroot Mountains and the Lolo pass, his wild ride down the Columbia River to Cape Disappointment, and his return trip to St. Louis. The post-expedition section covers Lewis's downward spiral and his death.

As for the expedition section of the book, Ambrose's inclusion of six maps detailing the expedition's route enhances the reader's understanding of the magnitude of the journey. Without the detailed maps, the reader would have a difficult time visualizing the voyager's route across the Louisiana Territory. The maps allow the reader to see the big picture. Additionally, they allow the reader to pinpoint specific sections of the trail. One shortfall of the maps is that the reader must constantly flip from the text to the maps to get an understanding of the expedition's location. A detachable map would have worked better. However, these maps coupled with the chronological organization give the reader an excellent understanding of the expedition's progress.

Ambrose's methodology of using quotes from Lewis's and Clark's journals and his use of statements or passages from noted Lewis and Clark historians adds much to the book's standing as a historical account of the expedition.⁸ His effective use of these primary and secondary sources adds to the book's credibility. These quotes are often followed by or preceded with a narrative explanation from Ambrose. The combination of the quotes and explanations reconstructs the expedition in a meaningful way. The reader experiences what Lewis saw with his own eyes. Ambrose's added comments complete the image. His images are vivid, compelling,

8. Ambrose used works from Lewis and Clark historians such as Gary Moulton, Donald Jackson, Arlen J. Large, and James P. Ronda.

and informative. For example, in the following passage, Lewis (italicized) and Ambrose describe the Clatsop Indian tribe's pleasure of tobacco:

For pleasure, he found that they were *excessively fond of smoking tobacco*. They inhaled deeply, swallowing the smoke from many draws *untill [sic] they become surcharged with this vapour [sic] when they puff it out to a great distance through their nostrils and mouth*. Lewis had no doubt that smoking in this manner made the tobacco *much more intoxicating*. He was convinced that *they do possess themselves of all [tobacco's] virtues in their fullest extent*.⁹

Another technique Ambrose employs to put the reader on the "trail" is his use of highly detailed descriptions. Many come from Lewis's journals, but Ambrose adds to them to complete the picture. *Undaunted Courage* packs thousands of these descriptions into its 484 pages. Tedious at times but still very important, these descriptions highlight the importance of Lewis's scientific discoveries. "He introduced new approaches to exploration and established a model for future expeditions by systematically recording abundant data on what he had seen, from weather to rocks to people."¹⁰ Lewis benefited from the crash course in science he undertook before the expedition. He discovered and described 122 species and subspecies of animals and 178 new plants during the expedition.¹¹ More importantly, Ambrose believes that without Lewis's leadership such discoveries would not have been possible.

IV. Ambrose's Insights into Leadership

Ambrose discusses effective leadership qualities that Meriwether Lewis possessed and concludes that Lewis was the greatest of all American explorers. Ambrose's list of these effective leadership qualities includes: courage and calmness under crisis, competence, maintenance of good order and discipline, and care of subordinates. These qualities are timeless. They were applicable to our military leaders yesterday and are just as applicable today.

9. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 339.

10. *Id.* at 404.

11. *Id.*

A particularly compelling passage describing Lewis's courage occurs on 26 July 1806 in the heart of hostile Blackfeet country as an overwhelming number of Blackfeet approaches his party. "He thought of flight and immediately gave it up. Suddenly a single Indian broke out of the milling pack and whipped his horse full-speed toward the party. Lewis dismounted and stood. Lewis held out his hand. His heart pounded. His life and the lives of his men were at stake."¹² Eventually the tension dissipated and the Indian and Lewis shook hands. Being calm under crisis paid off. What could have ended in a massacre of his men ended in a tense peace instead.

As for competence, "his talents and skills ran wider than they did deep."¹³ But for his wilderness skills, Lewis was not an expert at most things. Rather, he knew a little about many things. "Where he was unique, truly gifted, and truly great was as an explorer, where all his talents were necessary."¹⁴

Ambrose provides many examples of Lewis's interactions with his men—thirty soldiers comprising the Corps of Discovery. Lewis convened several courts-martial during the expedition and would not hesitate to give the guilty party fifty lashes. However, Lewis could be compassionate. In one court-martial, he granted one soldier clemency. He spared him from fifty lashes for a minor infraction. He also took care of his men. "He had a sense, a feel, for how his family was doing. He knew exactly when to take a break, when to issue a gill, when to push for more, when to encourage, when to inspire, when to tell a joke, when to be tough."¹⁵

Lewis also took care of his most important comrade, William Clark. Although Clark was only a lieutenant during the expedition, Captain Lewis treated him as an equal. He essentially allowed Clark to co-command the Corps of Discovery. Ambrose correctly points out that "divided command almost never works and is the bane of all military men"; however, it worked in this case.¹⁶ Although Lewis planned and organized the expedition, Ambrose does not forget Clark's contributions. "Clark was a tough woodsman accustomed to command; he had a way with enlisted men, without getting familiar; he was a better terrestrial surveyor than Lewis,

12. *Id.* at 387.

13. *Id.* at 482.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* at 99.

and a better waterman; Lewis apparently knew of his mapmaking ability.”¹⁷

Despite all of Lewis’s effective leadership qualities, Ambrose also points out Lewis’s leadership mistakes. For example, in a later encounter with the Blackfeet, Lewis made his biggest mistake. “Lewis called out orders: Shoot those Indians if they steal our horses.”¹⁸ Moments later, Lewis shot one of the thieves. “Enraged at Indian treachery, he left the medal he had given out last night at the night’s campfire hanging around the neck of the dead Indian, that they might be informed who we were.”¹⁹ Lewis’s blunder “was an act of taunting and boasting that put into serious jeopardy” the relationship between the United States and the most powerful tribe on the upper Missouri.²⁰ However, Ambrose still concludes that Lewis was a “near perfect army officer.”

Ambrose’s take on Lewis’s leadership skills is generally on point, however, his description of Lewis, as “near perfect army officer” is incorrect. There is no doubt that under the circumstances, Lewis did a tremendous job, but a “near perfect army officer” is too strong without further support. Ambrose’s earlier description of Lewis as a “great company commander” is more accurate. Lewis successfully led thirty men over nearly 8000 miles of uncharted territory. Along the way, they mapped the terrain, collected samples of plant and animal life, established relations with various Indian tribes, and produced journals for succeeding generations. Readers will be convinced that Lewis’s contributions through this journey indeed make him the greatest of all American explorers. Even with his bias in favor of Lewis, Ambrose has the courage to address Lewis’s less favorable side.

V. Ambrose’s Balance

As much as Ambrose admires Lewis, he does not hesitate in exposing Lewis’s dark side. Immediately following the expedition all was cheerful and bright for Lewis, but in a short three years all of this would be gone and Lewis would eventually take his own life. Ambrose does a fine job in

17. *Id.* at 97.

18. *Id.* at 391.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 393.

describing Lewis's downfall and proposes a very plausible theory as to why it occurred.

Lewis and his men returned from the expedition heroes. After arriving in St. Louis, "the daring adventure became the theme of universal conversation in the town."²¹ Soon after, Lewis turned his attention to his journals. They were the most valuable item he possessed. Although he knew the journals would provide "the introduction to and serve as the model for all subsequent writing on the American West,"²² he also "expected to get rich from the publication of the journals."²³ Lewis's greedy thoughts continued after being appointed governor of the Territory of Louisiana. He developed a scheme where he, as governor, would grant a monopoly to himself and his partner's fur company in the Territory of Louisiana.

Lewis changed. He did nothing to further the publication of his journals even at Jefferson's pleadings. He began to drink heavily and took medicine laced with opium or morphine. His finances were out of control. He was losing his control as governor. He had political enemies in St. Louis and Washington, and they were making his life miserable. He was not married. On 11 October 1809, Lewis committed suicide. "One cannot know. We only know that he was tortured, that his pain was unbearable."²⁴

Ambrose offers a very plausible theory as to why Lewis took his own life. "He had more success than was good for him. At age thirty-four, he missed the adulation he had become accustomed to receiving."²⁵ "He had become accustomed to instant obedience from a platoon-size force of the best riflemen, woodsman, and soldiers in the United States. He no longer held that command."²⁶ "In modern popular psychology he might have been said to suffer from postpartum depression. Malaria, alcohol, and a predisposition to melancholy would have made it more severe."²⁷ "His unluckiness in love may have compounded everything."²⁸ Ambrose's theory is compelling. Lewis thrived in the wilderness and felt most comfortable in that element. His Corps of Discovery followed his orders and

21. *Id.* at 413.

22. *Id.* at 405.

23. *Id.* at 415.

24. *Id.* at 475.

25. *Id.* at 441.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

treated him with respect. His life had meaning on the trail. He commanded an expedition that opened the American West. His discoveries were invaluable. That exhilaration could not be duplicated once he returned to civilization. His zest for life ceased.

VI. Conclusion

Despite Lewis's weaknesses and tragic end, Ambrose's thesis is correct. Thomas Jefferson made the correct decision when he chose Meriwether Lewis to command the expedition into the Louisiana Territory. Meriwether Lewis possessed the qualities that ensured a successful and productive journey—competence and the ability to lead. As Ambrose points out, Lewis “was a great company commander, the greatest of all American explorers, and in the top rank of world explorers.”²⁹ Ambrose's acknowledgment of Lewis's frailties lends credibility to his thesis. Imperfection does not mean that one cannot be a great leader.

Undaunted Courage is an action packed history book that reads like a novel. Check it out; read it. Enjoy this nonstop adventure and learn a little history along the way.

29. *Id.* at 483.