

commentary

from other pens...

American uncovers lost civilization

By Lawrence L. Knutson

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — In the fall of 1839, John Lloyd Stephens, author, celebrated traveler and newly commissioned diplomat, set off for Central America in search of a government. He found a lost civilization.

Stephens starts the story at the moment he boarded a ship in New York: "Being entrusted by the president with a special confidential mission to Central America, on Wednesday, the third of October, 1839, I embarked onboard the British brig, Mary Ann, Hampton, master, for the Bay of Honduras. ...

"It was before seven in the morning; the streets and wharves were still; the battery was desolate; and at a moment of leaving it on a voyage of uncertain duration, (New York) seemed more beautiful than I had ever known it before."

The voyage began a 10-month test of endurance, willpower and ingenuity — not to speak of diplomacy. It resulted in a wildly successful two-volume work, "Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan," published in 1841.

Stephens, then 33, was accompanied by skilled English illustrator Frederick Catherwood. They were beset by mosquitos, civil war, biting flies, rebel armies, food poisoning, torrential rain, mud, heat, exhaustion, disease and frustration.

"Everything susceptible of injury from damp was rusty or moldy and in ruinous condition; we were not much better," Stephens wrote.

Central America was in such an uproar Stevens could find no one to accept his diplomatic credentials.

"After diligent search, no government found," he reported to President James Buchanan. The unhappy and fragmenting Republic of Central America was soon to be divided into the modern states of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Honduras.

When Stephens laid diplomacy aside and turned to the real purpose of his journey, he was successful. He became the first writer to systematically observe the remains of Central America's Mayan civilization.

The story is told again in a remarkable new volume in which Stephens is just one of the stars: "Return Passages, Great American Travel Writing, 1780-1910," by Larzer Ziff of Johns Hopkins University.

Ziff tells Stephen's story and those of four other travelers and writers: John Ledyard, a Connecticut Yankee who sailed with Capt. James Cook around the world and crossed Russia and Siberia on foot; Bayard Taylor, a professional who was the only writer on Commodore Matthew Perry's 1852 expedition to Japan; Mark Twain, who focused his ironic spirit on tourism in such books as "Innocents Abroad;" and novelist Henry James, who made travel writing a literary performance.

"The books they constructed from those travels beguiled Americana readers with their depictions of the old and the exotic; everything that America was not," Ziff writes.

Ziff notes Stephens was already a successful travel writer. He was known to many as "the American traveler."

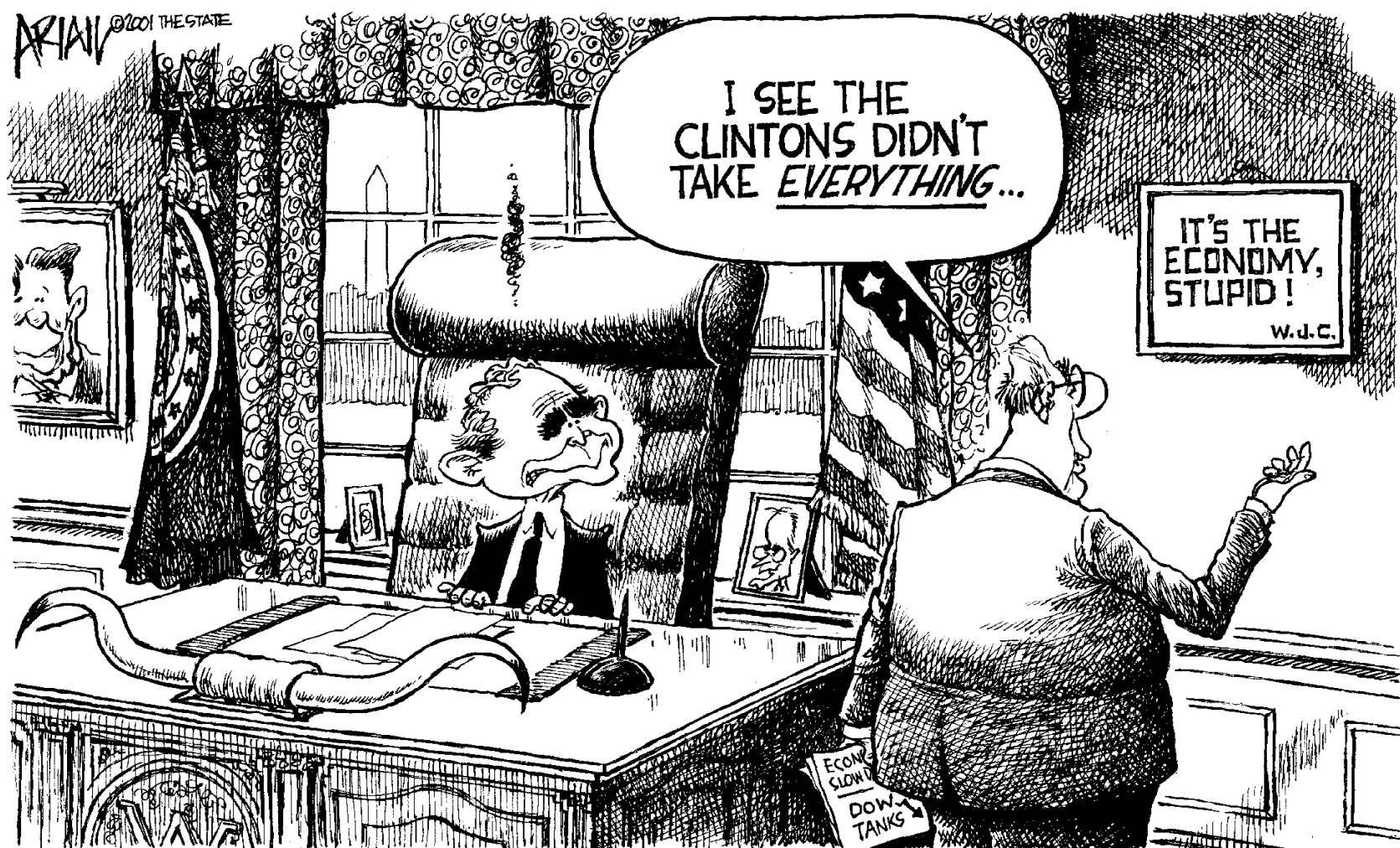
At Copan in Honduras, Stephens and Catherwood first found a carved slab, then a vine-covered and completely unknown city.

"It lay before us like a shattered bark in the midst of an ocean, her masts gone, her name effaced; her crew perished and none to tell whence she came. ... The only sounds that disturbed the quiet of this buried city were the sounds of monkeys moving among the tops of trees. ..."

By the time Stephens' second book on the remains of the Mayan civilization was published in 1843, the author could claim a number of discoveries — including 44 ancient cities, Chichen Itza in the Mexico's Yucatan among them, all previously "lost, buried and unknown."

"In scope, wealth of incident and significance of detail, Stephen's narratives remain unsurpassed by the books of travel of any other American," Ziff writes.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Lawrence L. Knutson has covered the White House, Congress and Washington's history for more than 30 years.



A new China strategy

Washington — In a recent phone conversation, Mario Cuomo went out of his way to salute what he calls the "sweet strength" of Secretary of State Colin Powell.

I believe that "sweet strength," displayed so intelligently last week, is the great victor of the Hainan Island incident. We need to show more of it if we are to avoid a far greater crisis in the Far East down the road.

To begin with, how about seeing the world's largest nation as our "strategic partner"? That phrase was former President Clinton's. It was the wording President Bush himself used recently before catching himself and resorting to that awful hardliners' term: "strategic competitor."

Doesn't the successful return of our 24 crewmen from Hainan Island argue for a return to the more positive brand of Washington-Beijing diplomacy? We tried the hard line and learned its limitations.

First we landed our plane on Chinese territory without permission. Second, we demanded the crew and plane's "prompt" return. We treated the life of a courageous — if reckless — Chinese pilot as unworthy of note, and a proud country's territorial integrity as unworthy of respect.

Fortunately for all, we corrected our course before an "incident" rose to a full-blown international crisis. We found the right language to express sor-



chris matthews

• commentary

row for the "missing pilot and aircraft" and admitted the desperate landing of a "severely crippled aircraft" in Chinese territory without "verbal clearance."

There is a plus side. In learning to speak the right language, America gained a potent and timely lesson in Chinese attitudes. The government and people of that great land believe that the United States seeks to establish "hegemony" over the entire globe.

Are they right? Let's take the continents one at a time.

Europe? You gotta believe it! Nothing bothers the policymakers here more than the thought that the old continent might actually build a peacekeeping force that doesn't require our membership.

North and South America? The Monroe Doctrine is 19th century American English for "hegemony" in this hemisphere.

The Mideast? The Persian Gulf? We're the boss.

Africa? Only when we think about it.

Asia? The presence of our 7th Fleet in the South China Sea, the constant reconnaissance of the Chinese coastline, the prospect of advanced arms sales to Taiwan, SDI? If you were a pro-democracy student in Beijing, wouldn't you take this as evidence that the United States wants to dominate the other side of the planet?

Add to this the recent word from the Pentagon that the United States has shifted its strategy from fighting a war in Europe to fighting one in Asia. What country do you — or the Chinese — think we're talking about?

Let's not miss the lesson we learned these past two weeks. We tried the tough talk. It got us nowhere. Then we tried diplomacy, the linguistic and cultural expertise of the State Department, plus what the former Democratic governor of New York calls Secretary Powell's "sweet strength."

Let's go with what worked. If we're smart as well as strong, we can be strong in Asia without turning the United States-Chinese relationship sour.

Chris Matthews, a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, is host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels. The 1999 edition of "Hardball" was published by Touchstone Books.

Life is a choice of many roads

In my more than 40 years of driving I started young I estimate that I've driven about 1.2 million miles. I've driven on scenic byways and ugly streets, good roads and bad highways, dirt paths and paved interstates. I've even spent some time on wrong roads.

I was pouring over a roadmap for another trip when the idea for this column came. I was trying to determine the best route to an out-of-the-way community where I was scheduled to speak in a few days. There were many choices, but with the map I could easily see the most direct route to where I wanted to go.

I thought to myself, what a shame life doesn't come with a map. It would help us keep our direction and arrive at a desirable location. With a map for a living, it would be easy to find destinations like Achievement, Happiness, Peace and Success. Without a map you could end up in places like Disaster, Heartbreak, Crime and Poverty.

I doubt that any convict, serving life without parole, started his or her life with that destination in mind. If certain the chronic alcoholic did not believe the road to social drinking would dead end in the gutter.

The abysmal failure and the brilliant success have this in common: They are where they are because of the roads they've traveled. They made different choices; they took different forks in the road. But both are what they are because of deci-



don taylor

• minding your own business

sions they made. Day-to-day, month-to-month and year-to-year their forward climb or their backward slide is the result of alternatives chosen.

There is good news. For just as certainly as a life of bad choices will lead you to destruction, good decisions will lead you to success. Most of us make mistakes in life, and usually we have opportunities to overcome them. However, some decisions carry dire consequences. Unsafe sex can lead to a slow, ugly death. The first drink of alcohol can take you to the gutter. The harmless drug can fry your brain. Hurrying across the railroad tracks can smack you into eternity.

Enjoying the trip

Life has been compared to a journey. Here are some tips for both choosing the right roads and enjoying the trip.

Use your compass. I don't buy the theory that most criminals don't know right from wrong. I believe most know, but don't do.

You know that killing another person is wrong. You know stealing isn't right. You know you

shouldn't lie. You know that having an affair with someone else's spouse is wrong. You know the wallet you found is not yours because you found it. Use your moral compass. It will give you true direction.

Expect some detours. It seems that every time I take a long trip, I encounter some construction and detours. While it would be easy to get upset over the delays, it doesn't help to do so. Instead, I build in some extra time on each trip. Then when I'm slowed down, I just enjoy the view.

Take the road less traveled. Just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean you have to. Being different is neither good nor bad. Some of our greatest travel memories have come from traveling the back roads and less-traveled highways.

There is a map. The best road map I've ever found for this life is the Bible. Even if you're not a believer, try this experiment for 90 days: Read one chapter from the book of Proverbs each day for 90 days. I believe you'll find strong direction for life's journey in the wisdom of these chapters.

Don Taylor is the co-author of "Up Against the Wal-Mart's." You may write to him in care of "Minding Your Own Business," PO Box 67, Amarillo, TX 79105. Column sponsored by Goodland Area Chamber of Commerce Business Development Committee.

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