

WE IMMIGRATE on the WATCH?

Mormon Political Alienation  
and the Search for Power

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Photography by  
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I want to discuss two stories that bear  
on how government succeeds or fails.  
They are not precisely polar opposites,  
but they are sufficiently distinct to shed light not  
only on the ideal of good government but on  
the current state of democracy  
in our nation in general and among  
Latter-day Saints in particular.

The first story is that of the Weimar Republic. "Weimar" is the story of the rise and fall of an experiment in democracy in Germany following the end of the Great War. In late September 1918 the German general staff concluded that the front, which had remained remarkably static throughout most of the war, could be pierced at any moment by the Allies. They demanded of their government an immediate cessation of hostilities. As events unfolded over the following weeks, it became even more apparent that Germany—which had been the greatest military power in the world a few short years before—was now on the brink of a total collapse.

Immediately before the guns fell silent in November 1918, the kaiser abdicated. A new German republic was proclaimed from the steps of the Reichstag Building in Berlin. By February 1919 delegates had convened in a national assembly to draft a new constitution. The assembly was held in the Prussian city of Weimar to avoid exposing the delegates to the turbulent and at times dangerous atmosphere of Berlin.

The constitution that was hammered out in Weimar was a remarkable document, reflecting—as did the constitution crafted in Philadelphia in 1789—an amazing assortment of compromises intended



to help bring together states that saw themselves as independent. The Weimar Republic was born, and Germany had entered the era of modern democracy.

But the Weimar era is remembered not for the hopeful start of a young democracy but for its tragic end. The seeds of the tragic end of the Weimar Republic were sown at its founding. The tools of peaceful compromise and change on which democracy is built were never fully accepted by Germany during this period. Political terrorism from the far right and the far left unraveled the rule of law as fast as a few devoted statesman such as Walter Rathenau could knit it together. The spirit of the time is captured in the oft quoted lines from Yeats' *The Second Coming*, written in 1919:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and  
everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Weimar was ultimately overrun by the blood-dimmed tide of National Socialism, and the First World War thus begat a Second.

The causes and effects of these developments are complex, and my real interest today lies elsewhere. What is significant for present purposes about the Weimar paradigm are some simplified explanations as to *why* the center could not hold, why democracy ultimately gave way to totalitarianism.

Like the collapse of the Soviet Union in our day, the dissolution of the German Empire stemmed ultimately from a want of legitimacy. As the German historian Erich Eyck put it, "Neither hand grenades nor machine guns destroyed Imperial Germany, but rather a lack of faith in its right to exist."

This lack of faith manifested itself in forces external and internal. External forces included the passion of the First World War's European victors for reparations and the continued occupation of Germany's industrial heartland in the Ruhr Valley. But even more interesting are the internal forces. The Weimar Republic failed ultimately because of a paradox. Political feeling among German citizens ran at the same time too hot and too cold.

On the one hand, extremism on both the right and the left overwhelmed public debate and ultimately beat down the fledgling democracy. Communists and nationalists used violence as a means of

destabilizing the regime. Street fighting and murder were accepted means of political change. Weimar, like the empire before it, ultimately failed because the majority of the people preferred extremist arguments to those in support of democracy. Coupled with street violence, this intellectual conflict overwhelmed the political debate. Many who in saner times might have evolved into citizens of a working democracy felt compelled to choose sides in the more dramatic conflict of right vs. left. The lesson here is that violence and hard intellectual opposition can undermine democracy.

On the other hand, Weimar is also remembered for the profound political apathy that prevailed among many who ought to have been the anchors of democracy. Extremism's triumph was made possible because liberal-minded men and women refused to participate in what they viewed as the dirty world of politics. When the processes of government by which the democratic will is formed, transformed into policy, and carried into action are repugnant to the average citizen, those processes quickly become a charade and their popular derision grows apace.

From the very beginning the Weimar constitution lacked an important advantage enjoyed by the government founded



144 years earlier at Philadelphia. Weimar was a democracy without democrats, a republic without republicans. Germany had acquired a form of constitutionalism but denied the power thereof.

Thus the outcome of Weimar was determined as much by those who were silent as it was by those who were shouting and marching. Some who could have provided effective leadership to the center in Weimar chose instead to stay home, close their doors and windows, and pull in their doormats. Disillusioned by the horrors of war and spiritually lost in the carnality of the 1920s, they simply chose not to get involved.

Two scenes from the show *Cabaret* tell this story very clearly. In an opening scene, the cabaret is filled with fun-loving hedonists. They appear willfully ignorant of the turmoil outside the doors of their pleasure house. Songs invite them to view life itself as a party, a cabaret. In the final scene the songs are the same, but the audience has changed. At every table are men wearing the uniform of Hitler's army.

Another example is Max Frisch's play *Herr Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*Mr. Everyman and the Arsonists*). It tells the story of a simple citizen who opens his own home to men who are transparently arsonists burning down homes throughout the city. As his wife complains to her husband about their strange and dangerous behavior, Herr Biedermann steadfastly refuses to get involved. In the end his apathy is engulfed in the flames that destroy his home.

My third example is closer to home. It is the story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its early interactions with the government. Once again, time does not permit a thorough review of this history. There is a rich variety of available sources.

What interests me in particular is what the leaders of the Church had to say in response to situations in which their government failed to live up to their expectations that it would ensure basic safety for them in the free exercise of their religion.

Much of this experience occurred during a period when the federal constitutional protections we take for granted today did not exist as such. The Bill of Rights was seen only as limiting federal

power; it was not applicable to the states. The only source of legal limitations on the power of state governments in most cases was state constitutions as they were interpreted by state courts.

Joseph Smith, among others, found this circumstance to be wholly unacceptable, and he was very direct in criticizing what he saw as the failure of the federal Constitution to provide effective enforcement for important rights such as freedom of religion. Speaking in Nauvoo, Joseph said:

*It is one of the first principles of my life, and one that I have cultivated from my childhood, having been taught it by my father, to allow every one the liberty of conscience. I am the greatest advocate of the Constitution of the United States there is on the earth. In my feelings I am always ready to die for the protection of the weak and oppressed in their just rights. The only fault I find with the Constitution is, it is not broad enough to cover the whole ground.*

*Although it provides that all men shall enjoy religious freedom, yet it does not provide the manner by which that freedom can be preserved, nor for the punishment of Government officers who refuse to protect the people in their religious rights, or punish those mobs, states, or communities who interfere with the rights of the people on account of their religion. Its sentiments are good, but it provides no means of enforcing them. It has but this one fault. Under its provision, a man or a people who are able to protect themselves can get along well enough; but those who have the misfortune to be weak or unpopular are left to the merciless rage of popular fury. [History of the Church, 6:56–57]*

Having diagnosed the problem, Joseph was ready with a prescription:

*The Constitution should contain a provision that every officer of the Government who should neglect or refuse to extend the protection guaranteed in the Constitution should be subject to capital punishment; and then the president of the United States would not say, "Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you," a governor issue exterminating orders, or judges say, "The men ought to have the protection of law, but it won't please the mob; the men must die, anyhow, to satisfy*

*the clamor of the rabble; they must be hung, or Missouri be damned to all eternity." Executive writs could be issued when they ought to be, and not be made instruments of cruelty to oppress the innocent, and persecute men whose religion is unpopular. [Ibid., 57]*

Capital punishment as a remedy remains largely outside the scope of modern civil rights law, apparently reserved for those cases in which a conservative black judge is nominated to sit on the Supreme Court.

Nonetheless, Joseph's fundamental criticism of the ineffectiveness of guaranteed religious liberty was answered in some measure when the Supreme Court in 1940 "incorporated" the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment into the constitutional limitations applicable to the states under the 14th Amendment (*Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296). What mischief the Court has done in recent years in interpreting the *substance* of those rights is another topic for another day.

The experience of Joseph Smith and, indeed, most of the early Latter-day Saints with American constitutional government was initially mixed and ultimately tragic. It is therefore remarkable that, like Joseph Smith, the Saints steadfastly proclaimed themselves to be loyal "friends" of the Constitution. Had the Constitution or the governments it supported been half as friendly to the Latter-day Saints as they were to the Constitution, the story of Church origins and the Mormon exodus would be remarkably different.

Although mob violence reached its peak before the migration, the deprivation of civil and political rights continued to increase after the Church was established in the West. The polygamy issue ignited a national condemnation of the Church and resulted in various laws that ultimately had the effect of disenfranchising Church members and confiscating Church property.

Let me focus on one example from this period: In 1862 Congress passed the Morrill Act, which prescribed punishments for the crime of bigamy in United States territories. Sponsors of the Morrill Act acknowledged that the purpose of the law was to prohibit the Mormons from practicing polygamy.

The Morrill Act was not the most effective step ever taken by the United States Congress. Bigamy requires proof that a person has been simultaneously married to two or more persons. Prosecutors will recognize this as a difficult evidentiary problem, particularly where the marriages were performed not in public but in private religious ceremonies in temples from which the public was excluded. Nevertheless, the Morrill Act hung like a cloud over the Church.

In 1875 a test case was brought before the Utah territorial courts. George Reynolds, private secretary to Brigham Young and the husband of two wives, was convicted by a mostly Mormon jury of bigamy. The idea was to gain a definitive ruling from the Supreme Court regarding the constitutionality of the antipolygamy law.

After some procedural delay, the case was presented to the United States Supreme Court for resolution. Counsel for Brother Reynolds argued that the Morrill Act was a direct violation of the First Amendment's prohibition that "Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion." In 1879 the Court unanimously upheld Reynolds' conviction and the Morrill Act on the grounds that the First Amendment limited only legislation designed to suppress religious opinion. It did not, in the Court's view, prevent Congress from criminalizing religious actions.

The narrow impact of this ruling was that Brother Reynolds was sentenced to two years in prison, which he served in the state penitentiary in Lincoln, Nebraska. Reynolds was certainly inconvenienced by this ordeal. He later served as a member of the presidency of the Seventy and is remembered as a prolific writer and careful student of the scriptures.

The broader effect of the ruling was nearly devastating to the Church. Emboldened by the Court's remarkable holding that religious conduct could be proscribed, Republicans in Congress redoubled their efforts to eradicate polygamy.

I have in my home a copy of the front page of the *Daily Graphic*, a New York illustrated newspaper from the last century, dated August 21, 1883. It depicts a savage mountain man labeled "Mormonism,"



dragging women by the hair and confronting the goddess of liberty, labeled “the U.S. Congress.” The savage is trampling on a piece of paper labeled “the Edmunds Bill.” The caption reads, “The Modern Blue Beard. The Survivor of the Twin Relics—What Does Congress Propose to Do About It?” The reference to the “twin relics of barbarism” is to the Republican Party/Know Nothing platform of 1856, which called for the eradication of slavery and polygamy as the twin relics of barbarism.

The illustration adequately captures the anti-Mormon attitude prevailing in that day, especially among Republican members of Congress. The Edmunds Act of 1882 addressed the shortcomings of the Morrill Act by prohibiting “bigamous cohabitation.” It was easier to prove that a man was living with two or more wives than that he was actually married to them. The Edmunds Act also barred persons living in polygamy from serving on juries, holding public office, or even voting.

Taking it a step further, the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 disincorporated the Church and authorized seizure of Church property. The territorial government of Idaho required an oath of all registered voters that excluded Mormons and even former Mormons from the franchise.

As I review the statements of Church leaders from the Utah period responding to the gross deprivations of religious and other liberties inflicted on the Church and its members during that time, I note their occasional bitterness at being thus treated by the nation they supported. I also am impressed with their flashes of humor.

Let me cite a single example. On July 4, 1855, a meeting was held in the bowery in Salt Lake City. Midway through the meeting during an address by Elder G.A. Smith, a table that had been placed on the stand to hold the papers of a federal judge (who had been invited to address the Saints) toppled over, fell off the stand, and split in two, making a loud noise. Without missing a beat, Elder Smith said, “So, the end cometh suddenly, the day of corruption is short, and its downfall is sure” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:72). The *Journal of Discourses* records that there was “great laughter” in the bowery.

But what most impresses me from the statements of the Church’s leaders during this period is their exalted view concerning government and the need for citizens to support good government. Despite being hounded nearly to extinction by the actions and derelictions of government officials, they maintained a fierce commitment to the principles underlying that government. They also displayed a remarkable vision of the role of the Church and its members in ultimately preserving constitutional government.

Speaking in 1882, Elder Erastus Snow reacted with barely controlled rage to allegations in the Eastern press and in Congress that Mormons were abusing their children and raising them in ignorance and squalor. After vigorously denying those charges, he said:

*And we are satisfied that ere long [the children of polygamous marriages] will be a tower of strength in the land, . . . [W]hen the nation, ripe in sin and iniquity, led on by reckless demagogues and politicians, shall applaud the acts of the legislators and judges and leading men in laying the axe deep in the tree of liberty, until they shall sap the juices that give life to our institutions, and thus undermine the foundation of good government, it will be sons and daughters of polygamous Utah, that will be found the true friends of human liberty, the true friends of that heaven-born freedom that has come to us through the fathers of our nation. The love of liberty is born in them, and human liberty is a part of the everlasting gospel; and God Almighty has decreed—and let Judge Edmunds and Congress and all the world hear it—that the gospel of the kingdom is established, never more to be thrown down or given to another people, that its destiny is to grow and increase and spread abroad until it shall fill the whole earth, and no power in earth or hell can stop it. [Journal of Discourses, 23:232–33]*

Elder Snow’s statement that members of the Church would one day be singled out as the true friends of liberty and freedom is echoed in a later comment made by George Q. Cannon. Elder Cannon spoke frequently on the subject of politics and the kingdom of God and delivered some of the most remarkable statements concerning the future role of the Church

in government. I want to use one of his great statements as a bridge to my next topic. Elder Cannon said:

*The time will come in this land—I tell you now, ye faint-hearted ones, the time will come when the counsels of the servants of God will be sought for in our own land and in all the states where our people live, because our conduct and our management will stand out in such bold relief in comparison with the management and conduct of others, that they will want to get our counsel and our help in their extremity. This will be the case, not only right here, but elsewhere. [George Q. Cannon, Collected Discourses, vol. 5, April 5, 1897]*

With that marvelous legacy, that glorious vision of the Latter-day Saints as the true friends of liberty, we are to be an ensign to the nations, not just in matters of religion but in government as well. The role envisioned for the members of the Church is almost breathtaking.

In light of that vision, it is fitting to ask: How are we doing? Are we ready to assume our place as a mecca for good government and political culture? Are we well on the road to fulfill this destiny, or is there something of the ashes of Weimar that clings to us? Are we tolerant of political violence? Are we apathetic, shunning the world of politics as “dirty business”?

Many of my observations concerning Mormon political culture are, I readily admit, based almost solely on anecdotal evidence. Even more important, as an observer of Mormon political attitudes, I am not ideally situated, since my home and almost all of my activities are not in Utah but in the Washington, DC, area. Nevertheless, I would be an unfaithful observer if I did not report that from my vantage point, Latter-day Saints have not yet fully lived up to their potential—their destiny—to be an example of good government to other nations.

With respect to tolerance for political violence, we must confront the truth that Utah and Idaho remain homes to some of the more virulent strains of the militia movement. It is indeed disheartening to hear that some of those groups appeared to find succor in communities that are predominantly Mormon.

But the more serious Weimar disease afflicting Mormons may be political apathy. Too many members of the Church of my acquaintance proudly tell me that they are not involved in politics, that they don't even vote anymore. These are, in all other respects, broad-minded people who have good values. They have simply come to view the world of politics as too infused with self-interest, corruption, and greed to merit their serious attention. They are more concerned with maintaining a good environment for their children at home than with society at large.

These politically disaffected are not unique to the Church. Political parties have come to recognize that these people are a major force in politics today.

Do I have any evidence that this is a problem in the Church other than my own casual observations? Perhaps.

Let me begin with the basics: voter registration and turnout. Focusing on the 1996 general election, we note that Utah's percentage of voter-age population registered to vote was 78.8 percent—somewhat higher than the national percentage of 74.4 percent. But Utah was nowhere near the national leader in voter registration. Even allowing for differences in voter registration procedures, Utah does not stand out as a leader in having its citizens registered to vote in a presidential election year. Montana with a voter registration percentage of 90.05 percent, Colorado with 81.98 percent, and Oregon with 81.38 percent could be more accurately characterized as leaders. Alaska with 97.6 percent and Maine with 105.96 percent are truly lights shining on a hill. (I can't explain how Maine managed to register more voters than it had citizens. Perhaps some of Utah's voters inadvertently registered to vote in Maine.)

Utah's voter turnout figures are even more lackluster. Utah barely cleared the national average of 49 percent with a voter turnout of 49.93 percent. Indeed, Utah's voter turnout percentage was exceeded by every Western state except California and Nevada. Once again, Maine had national bragging rights with a voter turnout of 71.9 percent.

OK, so much for quantity. What about quality? Are Utah's elected representatives known for their outstanding abilities and

integrity? Here the picture is frankly somewhat brighter. Focusing on Utah's congressional delegation, it is fair to say that they are well respected nationally. However, with the exception of Orrin Hatch, who appears from time to time on lists of possible presidential candidates, none of Utah's congressional delegation has real national recognition. To be sure, Governor Leavitt strongly impressed the leadership of his party at the Republican National Convention in San Diego last year. But his prospects for national prominence are uncertain.

Indeed, after Senators Hatch and Bennett and Governor Leavitt, the most recognizable Utah political figure among a group I consulted in Washington remains Edith Greene (formerly) Waldholtz.

But I am wandering from my central point, which is that Latter-day Saints generally are not sufficiently engaged in the process of good government and politics to justify putting a check mark indicating "fulfilled" by the prophecies I quoted above. I think that I am on firm ground when I say that we as a people have not so perfected the art of good government that the world is now ready to beat a path to these mountains to learn our unique ways of political administration. The need for members to be active was strongly underscored in a recent First Presidency letter that

*strongly urge[d] men and women to be willing to serve on school boards, city and county councils and commissions, state legislatures, and other high offices of either election or appointment, including involvement in the political party of their choice.*

How will this challenge and the prophecies mentioned above be fulfilled? More important, who will fulfill them? I believe that, to a great extent, it will be the rising generation that will bring renown to the Church and to our communities of Saints, not only on the Wasatch Front but wherever the Saints are congregated throughout the world. As you contemplate your lives on the "outside," please bear in mind the religious imperative each of you carries to be the best sort of citizen, to be actively involved in promoting good government, and to render public service in the course of your career.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a few thoughts concerning public service—"do's and don'ts," if you will.

First, don't be so consumed by your many other responsibilities that you do not take time to become involved in good government. I have occasionally heard members of the Church say that they have sacrificed their careers or their political activities for their families or their service in the Church. Although this trade-off may be appropriate in individual circumstances, it seems to me to rest on a unexamined notion of the word "sacrifice." As often as not, sacrifice, when applied to how we budget life's short day, means not giving up one worthy activity for another. Rather it means doing *both* worthy activities and giving up some cherished but nonessential third activity.

Second, join a political party and be active in it. Being active in a party gives you credibility and an outlet to express your views. This advice is not a recruitment seminar for Young Republicans or Campus Democrats. I am a registered Republican and am active in my party. But I don't believe that Republicans have a corner on good government or decency. Good people in each party are closer together than they might think. In the long run, it doesn't matter as much as you might think which party you join. Just pick the one you think best expresses your point of view.

Of course, the Church is neutral on matters of partisan politics. The Church's stance has been made clear repeatedly and in the strongest possible terms.

*The Church, while reserving the right to advocate principles of good government underlying equity, justice, and liberty, the political integrity of officials, and the active participation of its members, and the fulfillment of their obligations in civic affairs, exercises no constraint on the freedom of individuals to make their own choices and affiliations. I am authorized by President McKay to say that any man who makes representation to the contrary does so without authority and justification in fact.* [Stephen L Richards, in Conference Report, October 1951, p. 114–115; emphasis added]

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Mormons are viewed by many political observers—and indeed by many members of the Church—as being most closely associated with the Republican Party. This is a deep irony. In the 19th century the Republican Party’s “demagoging” of the polygamy issue as one of the “twin relics of barbarism” was the wellspring of much ill feeling toward the Church. Indeed, the brethren had to actively encourage a few members to join the Republican Party to specifically avoid being viewed as a one-party people.

Being identified with a single party has practical consequences as well. The current assumption in political circles that the vast majority of Mormons are “safe” Republican votes is comparable to the assumption that African-American voters are “safely” democratic. Indeed, the experience of the two groups illustrates important political truths: A group identified with a single political party runs the risk of losing a great many political battles. Also, ideologically safe constituencies tend to be taken for granted by their own parties.

Third, volunteer to work for a candidate whose principles are compatible with your own. You may begin by stuffing envelopes, but you will be surprised how quickly your talents and interests are recognized.

Fourth, put quality into your political efforts. Too much political and governmental work, particularly writing, looks like it was done by amateurs. The extra effort to do quality work is minimal in light of its effectiveness. Remember, it will be the quality of our approach to good government that will attract the notice of the world.

Fifth, never confuse your political choices with doctrine. Don’t view those who disagree with you as anything other than fellow citizens who happen to be

wrong. One of the problems of the Christian Coalition and other conservative groups until very recently has been that you can’t disagree with them on one issue. If you are against them on one issue, you are anathema to them. Remember the advice of Ronald Reagan: Just because someone disagrees with me 20 percent of the time doesn’t make him my enemy. He is my ally.

Sixth, if you are given the opportunity to serve in government in any capacity, keep your personal integrity. Most who serve in federal or state government do so only after taking a solemn oath. Remember that oath. It is not a personal oath of the sort administered to German troops in the Nazi regime to support the ideas of one man. It is a constitutional oath that binds the individual to protecting constitutional government. Know beforehand what your principles are. Occasionally we have seen how the moral lapses of a member in a conspicuous position of trust can bring discredit to the Church. Keep the commandments. To use a metaphor of some relevance at this institution, it is a bit like knowing your limits when you are dating. Appropriate limits are difficult to set when temptation is presented. Wear your values comfortably, not on your sleeve, but like a mantle that fits you well.

Seventh, develop a sense of history. I am amazed at how often issues recur in our system of government and how unaware most participants are that near precedent exists for the positions they are taking. Knowing history can save you a great deal of trouble.

Finally, remember that the good news about your political involvement is that

you can change the world. The bad news is that you just might change it for the worse. Be as certain as you can possibly be of the correctness of your principles, but avoid hubris. Remember the best and the brightest are often the most dangerous folks in town.

You have a great advantage over many others who enter government service and politics. From your service in the Church, I hope you have learned how to work effectively with people and to make them feel a part of both problems and solutions. You may have had the opportunity to apply the counsel given by Elder M. Russell Ballard over the course of several recent addresses in general conference and in his recent book concerning the power of councils. Much of this knowledge has a direct application in the world of politics and government.

Even more important, you have an embedded system of values that make you like precious gold in the moral wasteland that is late 20th-century America. Be true to those values. Teach them to your families. They are precisely what are needed in the coming era.

It is my sincere hope that you will be the generation that reaches the full potential for the Church to be an ensign to the nations in matters of government.

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