Two Utahs: A Centennial Retrospective

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On the eve of Utah's statehood centennial, a national survey named it "America's most liveable state." Governor Mike Leavitt greeted the news with a different twist on the same idea: "Utah," he beamed, "is the most American of states." At about the same time, the International Olympic Committee, responding favorably to Utah promoters' contention that "the world is welcome here," announced from Budapest, Hungary, that Salt Lake City would host the 2002 Winter Games.

It would seem from all of this that a century after winning its long fight for political union with the United States, Utah had also finally achieved full social, economic, and cultural membership in the Union after a tumultuous history of tensions between its provincial ways and the national mainstream. Such an impression, however, is mythic, although powerfully so. "It is from myth," as historian William Miller observed, "that causal energy flows" (152). Certainly the strength of Utah's mythic assimilation into the national mainstream has manifested itself in numerous ways during the state's recent commonwealth period. A visitor to Salt Lake City during the last two decades of the twentieth century would observe a typically dynamic city of the New West, apparently integrated into the global economy and national culture. But beneath the surface of homogenous impressions is a complicated dichotomy of culture that slices deeply into the economic, social, and political realities of a single place that is at once home to two distinct peoples, one united by the fact that it is not the other.

Despite the governor's proclamation of Americanness, Utah remains a most un-American place. With the exception of its satellites in the Mormon heartland of the Great Basin, it is perhaps the only place in the Union where diversity usually comes down to whether folks are of one kind or another—Mormons or non-Mormons (or Gentiles, the nineteenth-century term accepted on both sides for Utahns who did not adhere to the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Contrary to public-relations notions, the gulf that separates the two groups remains wide indeed, perhaps as wide as it has been in the hundred years since statehood.

A remarkable feeling of disfranchisement and persecution among Utah's contemporary non-Mormon population is perhaps the most poignant hallmark of the persistence of this lurking problem. One expatriate Utahn labeled himself "a recovering non-Mormon" and likened Gentile life in the state to the experience of Palestinians in Israel. Lamenting the state of denial that exists in Utah, he suggested that "Mormons need to take responsibility for the historical and systematic exclusion of non-Mormons from positions of influence and power in Utah society," and that Gentiles must "build forms of community that are not based on the stigmatized identity of being 'non-something'" (Thompson 1-2). The tragic truth is that no sentient Gentile has long escaped the ominous and often painful immediacy of Mormon predominance, hanging precarioulsy over the fabric of Utah society like the sword of Damocles.

Reasons for the persistently gaping distance between the two Utahs are as intriguing as the history that reveals them, for also contrary to common impressions, the Mormon-Gentile conflict is not of recent vintage in Utah history and has a long and colorful past. Even a cursory examination of the state's history will reveal that despite the predominance of Mormon culture, non-Mormons have played a continuously important role in Utah since even before Brigham Young's 1847 declaration that it was the right place. The shifting patterns of conflict and cooperation between the two groups have received much attention in Utah studies, but a complete understanding of the powerful dynamic that the two-Utahs concept suggests has yet to emerge, despite some good attempts in books such as Robert Joseph Dwyer's The Gentile Comes to Utah (1941), Helen Z. Papanikolas's The Peoples of Utah (1976), and Dean May's Utah: A People's History (1987). (May deserves major credit for conceptualizing the idea of the two Utahs in the last chapter of his book.) On the other hand, Tom Alexander has called for a new approach in which "we look at the lives of Utahns as a single piece." With a particular eye toward the Mormon-Gentile confrontation, a sojourn in Utah's past and present suggests that such an approach may be healing but difficult.

Once Mormons began to flow into the area they called Deseret in the mid-nineteenth century, other peoples already there, or those who would come afterwards, found themselves dealing with a monolithic presence, for Mormonism was not only a religion but also a cohesive community, separatist and exclusivist. So the early division was natural and perhaps inevitable. Contributing to the problem were the surprisingly tight quarters the two groups of Utahns found themselves sharing. Due partly to the Mormons' Puritanical model of community building on the nuclear pattern, and partly due to the aridity of the area, Utah's urban areas held much of its population from the beginning. Despite a heavy LDS majority in the early years, it was primarily in those growing urban settings where the persistent Mormon-Gentile conflict displayed itself from the beginning of the Mormon invasion of the West. And it continues to be the case in the
The Native American peoples of the Great Basin were, of course, the first non-Mormons in Utah history, along with a few mountain men, such as Jim Bridger and Miles Goodyear. Destined to exile, both groups viewed the Mormon arrival with successive degrees of enthusiasm and horror. Like the Utes and the Shoshone, Bridger and Goodyear discovered too late that doing business with the Chosen People was fraught with danger, because with God's approval and a mission to prepare an earthly kingdom for an imminent Millennium, the Mormons found ready justification for whatever actions would benefit their purposes. Although it is doubtful that Brigham Young had read Machiavelli, he was often an ardent practitioner of Prince-like tactics. Like many disgruntled and embittered Gentiles who would follow, the mountain men simply packed up and left, while the aborigines spent a decade or two alternately feigning cooperation and trying to outmaneuver the Mormons by playing them off against the U.S. government. Then, like their cousins elsewhere in the West, they resigned themselves to reservations and the edge of the picture.

Young had envisioned the Great Salt Lake Valley as a place away from everything and everyone, a safe haven in which to build the Mormon Kingdom. But even as he made his famous pioneering journey in 1847, the Mexican War was redefining the map of the American West. Utah would become immediately "the Crossroads of the West," especially with the discovery of gold in California the following year. Hordes of California-bound emigrants would flow through the territory during the first years of Utah's Mormon occupation. Not a few of them found reason to remain, some assimilating into the Mormon population, but many founding the first permanent community of Gentiles, often in association with an increasing collection of disaffected Mormons who chose not to leave the area. History and geography immediately dictated that the Mormons' exclusive enclave would never really be such. It seemed there was simply no place they could go in North America where the world would not follow.

Contributing to the end of any isolationist vision the Saints may have had, Utah's inclusion in the Mexican Cession of 1848 required Young and his lieutenants to forsake the notion of establishing an independent Mormon state in the volatile West. They thus shifted their strategy and applied for immediate statehood, after the model of Texas and California. Instead, they received territory status along with New Mexico as part of the Compromise of 1850. Although Young managed to get himself named territorial governor, Washington appointed several non-Mormon outsiders to powerful government posts in the territory. Those first federal officials, arriving in 1851, became the trailblazers for literally tens of thousands of Gentiles who would come to Utah over the next century and a half as a result of employment with the United States government.

Many of those first officials arrived in Utah with no real sense of the nature of Mormon society. Not only were they outraged by polygamy, which became rather obvious in the wilderness setting, but they also quickly chafed at the realization that Young and his cohorts were quite literally running a theocracy, in defiance of the norms of rambunctious American democracy. Like so many Gentiles who would follow, these "runaway judges" could not stomach Mormon society and fled eastward, hoping to expose Utah as a cancer on the body politic. Able footwork on the part of the Mormon hierarchy, as well as a preoccupation in the East with a dissolving Union, kept Young in place as virtual dictator in Utah for several more years, but the first public clash between Mormons and Gentiles had set an early course for a future of serious discord between the two groups.

In the meantime, Mormon millenarianism proceeded unabated. The Reformation of 1856 stirred heated passions, as J esediah Grant and others reminded the Saints that they had no place in the ordinary world of American society, which was disintegrating under the judgment of God. They preached the harsh doctrine of Blood Atonement, suggesting in the extreme that only faithful Latter-day Saints deserved to breathe the air of God's Kingdom (Sessions 211). Although no solid evidence exists that any non-Mormon or dissident fell victim to such teachings (except perhaps the victims of the infamous Mountain Meadows Massacre [Moorman 12S]), they deepened the distrust between Mormons and Gentiles, the latter group now including a significant number of apostates and schismatics. Indeed, as Quakers and other dissenters had discovered in colonial New England, the formerly persecuted handily became the persecutors, as the Mormon establishment mercilessly worked to quash such uprisings as the spiritualist Godbeites and the communalist Morrisites (Lyon and Leonard 322-23).

Just as the Reformation worked to stiffen Mormon resolve against outside influences and internal dissension, the presidential election of 1856 set the stage for the next major invasion of Gentiles, one that would doom permanently any idea that Utah might yet become the Mormon utopia. Elected against the backdrop of a Republican invective against "the twin relics of barbarism, slavery and polygamy," Democratic president James Buchanan took office in March 1857 determined to do something dramatic about at least one of those relics. By mid-summer, a huge army (led not coincidentally by predominantly southern officers) was on its way to Utah for the purpose of subduing the "rebellious" Mormons and forcibly replacing Brigham Young as governor. As with all large military expeditions, this one came trailing clouds of camp followers—teamsters, contractors, gamblers, whores, and other assorted adventurers—the next contribution to the Gentile population of the territory.

Although Young again managed to survive a serious threat from the outside in the "Johnston's Army" episode, he gave up the governorship in a deal to avert a war with the United States, but he did not relinquish much of his real power. As he was wont to do, he deftly shifted strategies. While working for statehood and thus a return to self-rule, the Mormons would isolate themselves from the outside and utlanders through economic, social, and political exclusionism, inasmuch as physical isolation was no longer possible. To the chagrin of a growing Gentile presence in the territory, the Mormons developed a siege mentality to assure a hostile front against the forces that would Americanize the territory. By the time General Johnston's heir arrived in the form of Patrick Edward Connor with his California Volunteers in 1862, truly faithful Mormons would not associate with Gentiles. This included doing business with them except under the most pressing circumstances.

In reaction to Mormon antagonism, Connor and the new wave of Gentiles sought to dismantle the Mormons' hold on the territory through immutable economic development based largely upon mining, which Young had eschewed in favor of pastoral activities. Connor believed that Utah would quickly become like the other territories of the West, as a wave of non-Mormon miners, merchants, and
entrepreneurs washed the Saints and their economic backwardness into insignificance. But the Mormon hierarchy had other ideas. Bolstered with the continual arrival of new converts, the church created its own political party, as well as its own mercantile and banking institutions, and encouraged its followers to enter into cooperative enterprises, eventually to include rural communes, that would keep Gentile political and economic power at bay. By the time the lines of the transcontinental railroad met at the northern end of the Great Salt Lake in 1869, Connor's plan had succeeded in establishing a wealthy and influential Gentile powerbase in Utah, but Mormonism was far from drowning in a wave of Americanization. During the 1870s, for example, the Mormon People's party easily dominated the polls across the territory, despite the best efforts of the Gentiles' Liberal party.

With Mormons still in virtual control of the territory, the Gentile community took a page from Young's book and shifted strategies. Hanging about the neck of Mormonism was an albatross of awful weight. Since admitting publicly the practice of polygamy in 1852, the Saints had seemed stoically willing to endure the moral outrage of the nation as simply more persecution that validated their righteousness. Now, Gentiles and their allies outside the territory would use the issue to break the back of Mormon political power in Utah. In the public forefront of this effort rose another group of non-Mormons separate from the mining and mercantile interests that formed the backbone of the Gentile establishment. Evangelists, missionaries, and other reformers were ushered to the foreground to proclaim the need for a moral housecleaning of Utah territory. Before statehood could come, Mormons would have to give up their peculiar institution, as well as their stranglehold on the political economy.

In the meantime, the great colonizer Brigham Young had died (1877), Connor's mining development was working inexorably to increase the percentage of non-Mormons in the territory, and the anti-polygamy "Raid" against Mormonism pushed the church into genuine crisis. By 1890, the year the Mormon hierarchy finally announced it would forsake polygamy, only 56.1 percent of Utahns claimed affiliation with the LDS church (Lyon and Leonard 693). With the help of a federal election commission and the disfranchisement of polygamists, the Liberal party had won numerous seats in the territorial legislature and control of several city governments. But the deal for statehood that was cooking in Washington would make moot any claim of approaching victory on the part of Connor's disciples. In return for an abandonment of polygamy and a guarantee from the church of a "normalization" of politics in Utah (Lyman 132-41), Congress would finally vote to grant statehood, after nearly a half-century of unsuccessful efforts. With appropriate fanfare and hoopla, Utah entered the Union on January 4, 1896, as the forty-fifth state.

The non-Mormon community went along, although perhaps somewhat less enthusiastically than Mormons. Traditionally, the Gentiles' best hopes for influence in the territory lay with appointed officials from the outside. But the Americanization process seemed well on its way to completion. Gentiles reassured themselves that without polygamy and other radical vestiges of its nineteenth-century radical propensities, Mormonism might easily become just another harmless religion, despite the preposterous nature of its origins. Indeed, church officials seemed determined to make that the case, as they made careful moves to slip Mormonism into the innocuous mainstream. During the first decades of the new century, successive presidents Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant, representing a new generation of Mormon leadership, openly and vigorously courted public opinion. Smith appeared before Congress to assure the nation of the Mormons' complete willingness to join American society, and Grant became an ardent and outspoken champion of capitalism.

Politically, it seemed for a time that the Mormon-Gentile conflict would fade into the background of Utah's new status as a bumptious western state and partner in the booming American enterprise. Mormon apostle Reed Smoot entered the U.S. Senate, and, in league with a generally happy coalition of Gentiles and Mormons in the Republican party, built a powerful political machine that virtually ran the state for three decades. A few Gentiles rankled at the meddling of such a powerful church functionary in politics and attempted to create a third party (the American party) to oppose the Smoot-corrupted Republicans and the LDS-dominated Democrats, but non-Mormon politicians like Utah's first Jewish governor Simon Bamberger realized that success in state politics depended upon support from both Gentiles and Mormons. (Bamberger quipped that Utah was the only place in the world where one could be both a Jew and a Gentile at the same time.)

On the eve of World War I, Utah's population was approaching parity between the two groups, now cooperating in a largely congenial manner in a progressive society and burgeoning economy. During the war, the distance between the two Utahs became so narrow as to be often unnoticed. "The sacrifices of the war effort," wrote Dean May, "affirmed that Utahns were loyal to the United States and convinced many that she had integrated fully into the nation" (172-73). Then came the farm and mining depression of the 1920s that devastated the arid West, and then the Great Depression of the 1930s. Fleeing poverty, more than 60,000 Utahns left the state between the war and 1940 (Gurgel 112), when the census reported that the percentage of Mormons in Utah had climbed back over the 60 percent mark for the first time since 1880. Both a high LDS birthrate and the likelihood that less Utah-connected Gentiles led the outmigration had reversed the trend toward what was then never to happen in the twentieth century—minority status for Mormons in Utah.

The pervasive Mormon-Gentile conflict nevertheless seemed to be on the cusps of virtual extinction. The two groups had nearly completed an integration of their economic and political activities, and the social distance between the two was as narrow as it could be, given the continuing theological and practical peculiarities of the Mormon religious tradition. In the midst of these demographic and economic changes, several momentous developments within the LDS church itself would come to influence dramatically the course of the problem and widen considerably the gulf between the two Utahs.

During his tenure as church prophet (1918-45), Heber Grant made into a hallmark of his administration obedience to the Word of Wisdom, the LDS health code that prohibited the use of tobacco and the consumption of alcohol, coffee, and tea—a doctrine previously taken lightly by most Mormons. During the 1930s, Grant's emphasis of the Word of Wisdom grew to mean that only those who obeyed it strictly would be numbered among truly faithful Latter-day Saints. One could not hold an important church position nor enter the temple unless willing to abstain from the forbidden items. The social effects of this development upon the Mormon-Gentile conflict were profound. Given that virtually every adult American used at least one of the proscribed "vices," the identification of any Utahn as the
Grant's devotion to the Word of Wisdom also helped create a widening political rift between Mormons and Gentiles, inasmuch as Franklin D. Roosevelt campaigned vigorously in 1932 for an end to Prohibition. Even though he was a lifelong Democrat, Grant therefore rankled at the New Deal from the beginning and devoted much of the rest of his presidency to railing against FDR. Under the strong influence of his counselor J. Reuben Clark, Grant also reacted to the growth of federal welfarism with the creation of the Church Security Plan in 1936, an ambitious scheme to take Mormons off government relief and to turn back in the direction of economic exclusionism (actually more a nagging feeling for Gentiles than a reality). More important, the anti-New Deal crusade of the church and its organ, the Deseret News, left a powerful impression with the faithful that good Mormons should vote Republican.

Although Utah ironically cast the deciding vote in favor of repeal in 1933 (against the pleadings of Grant), the seeds were sown that would make Utah by the end of the century "the most Republican state in the Union." Grant's anti-Roosevelt sentiments also had the effect of recreating in some measure the old political division on religious lines that had characterized Utah electioneering during the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of local politics. Although not a few active Mormons would gain election as Democrats in the post-World War II years, the more typical situation involved a notion that the Republican party more accurately represented the increasingly individualistic propensities of the Mormon people. A long tradition of distrust of the federal government and a growing affection for the capitalist/corporate paradigm caused Mormons to ally with postwar Republican conservatism and to identify with business interests. Concomitantly, Mormons disliked the big-government identification of the Democratic party, as well as its link to labor.

Gentiles found it increasingly difficult to attend neighborhood GOP mass meetings that seemed like local LDS ward reunions. Most fled to the Democratic party, quickly shrinking into an ever-smaller minority, along with the percentage of non-Mormons in the state. Despite an official end to the so-called "Gathering" of Mormons to Zion and the immigration of large numbers of workers to Utah's burgeoning military-industrial complex, the Mormon share of the population pie expanded steadily during the first three decades after the end of the war. Swimming against the powerful current of a high LDS birth rate, Gentiles saw the postwar baby boom push the Mormon percentage of Utah's total population to 65 percent in 1950, to 68 percent in 1960, and to a century high 72 percent in 1970 (May 195).

Combined with the prosperity of the state and the church, the Mormon population explosion and the end of the Gathering also created a dynamic growth of the faith outside the Great Basin. This supplied Mormons with a new confidence in the idea that they indeed belonged to the "only true church." In neighborhoods already dominated by the activities and identities of the local ward and ward house, Gentiles found it increasingly difficult to assimilate socially when Mormon attentions seemed focused solely upon the ripeness of a non-Mormon for conversion. Such missionaryism seemed to Mormons a natural outgrowth of their membership in God's Kingdom, but to Gentiles it often created feelings of deep alienation from usually well-meaning Mormon neighbors, who seemed wrapped in their exclusionary ward activities or who offered a hand of friendship only as long as it led toward the baptismal font.

By the time of the 1980 Census, the Mormon population statewide still hovered near 70 percent. In the populous Wasatch Front counties of Salt Lake, Davis, and Weber, the LDS percentage ranged between 66 and 70 percent. In Utah County, it stood at a staggering 90 percent. Only in four rural counties (Daggett, San Juan, Carbon, and Grand) were Mormons in a minority, although in two of those less than 50 percent of the inhabitants were counted as "church" at all. Other than the Mormons, only the Catholics could claim significant membership statewide, with all other denominations flourishing only along the urban corridor of the Wasatch Front. By the nineties, that had begun to change, particularly with rapid growth in communities outside the Wasatch Front, such as in Washington County. But rural Utah remained largely LDS or unchurched.

In addition to the resurrected social and political divisions between Mormons and Gentiles, LDS theology became again a major issue for the non-Mormon faiths, as they worked to combat the "rolling-stone" momentum of the predominant church. Mormon-baiting often became a prevalent theme for worship services, particularly among more fundamentalist, "Bible-based" churches, which found the Mormons' extra books of scripture and non-trinitarian theology blasphemous. Such bitter antagonisms only served to thicken anew the aura of estrangement between Mormons and Gentiles.

Approaching the end of the century, Mormons and Gentiles appear superficially to have achieved amalgamation. In suburbia, they live in the same houses, drive the same cars, shop in the same stores, work in the same places, salute the same flag, and pursue the same American dream. To some degree, they even wear the same clothes (which leads to the underwear factor, another Word-of-Wisdom-style issue that strictly divides the two groups, the Mormons in their often visible knee-to-shoulder temple garments.) They come generally from the same Euro-American stock. Yet they are about as far apart as intermingled peoples can be.

But what of the ethnic population of Utah, most of it non-Mormon?

This essay has purposefully neglected the rich history of minority groups in Utah in order to focus essentially on the tensions between two groups of white Americans. Like the Native Americans of the early Mormon period, ethnic groups seem destined to occupy the edge of the picture of the Mormon-Gentile struggle for some time, partly because the white Gentile population has found little common cause with minorities. The clannishness of Mormons, their latent racism, their devotion to middle-class ideals, and their support of development and runaway growth suggest the continued marginalization of ethnic minorities in the state. And ethnic groups in Utah remain relatively small (although the Hispanic population is growing rapidly, as it is elsewhere in the West).

In his acclaimed America (1973) and companion television series, historian/journalist/media personality Alistair Cooke introduced his segment on "Domesticating a Wilderness" with a sometimes irreverent look at the Mormon settlement of Utah. Millions of people across the English-speaking world learned as facts a number of common myths about Utah and the Mormons. For example, he concluded the piece by saying that "to this day in Utah, the Church...owns most of the office buildings, theaters, real estate, insurance firms, and
banks' (226). Leaving a distinct impression that Utah is both nearly all Mormon and almost all rural, he also said that during "the depression of the 1930s the Mormons were the only farm cooperative that steadily refused all help from the federal government" (225), a laughably false statement.

That such mythic constructs prevail in the world beyond the borders of the state is not surprising, given the unusual history of Utah. But the truth, similarly, lies beyond the borders of the myth. First, Utah has always been a diverse place, and continues to be, although the nature of its diversity, as we have seen, remains a curiosity and an oddity. Mostly because of the scarcity of liveable space, Utah became quickly an urban stage where a complicated drama of cultural conflict played against the backdrop of general western history. The Mormons have long since ceased to be fiercely independent as a people or individually un-American. Yet the state remains a most peculiar entity, because of the predominance of LDS culture and a plethora of mostly social factors that keep Mormons separate from their non-Mormon neighbors. There indeed seem to be, within the same state borders, two Utahs, touching each other but rarely embracing.

WORKS CITED