

The Holy War Surrounding Evan Mecham

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WHILE I AM NOT A POLITICAL SCIENTIST, SOCIOLOGIST, OR HISTORIAN, I am one of many Arizona Latter-day Saints who will never forget Evan Mecham or the "Holy War" of public opinion that surrounded his governorship and frequently involved the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In 1986 Evan Mecham was approached by Republican friends who asked him to run for governor for the fifth time. Mecham, a sixty-two-year-old father of seven and grandfather of eighteen, former bishop, and conservative politician, thoughtfully considered their request. He consulted his family, and as his friend Shirley Whitlock relates, "They decided to fast and pray about it. After a three-day fast . . . it was confirmed that he should run and that he would win."¹ Confident of the outcome, Evan Mecham entered the campaign.

Mecham ran against two candidates, a Democrat and an Independent. On election night he calmly confided to Whitlock, "I have assurance that I'm going to win." When the ballots were tabulated, it seemed to some that God had worked in a mysterious way to fulfill his promise to Evan Mecham: 61 percent of the voters stayed home in the lowest turnout in forty-four years, and Mecham won the election with only 39 percent of the vote.

President Ezra Taft Benson's appearance on the podium at Mecham's inauguration led some Latter-day Saint supporters to believe that the Church was endorsing the new governor, or that Mecham had a "divine calling" to office. According to an unsubstantiated rumor circulating at that time, President Benson attended the temple with Mecham and "set him apart" to be Arizona's new governor.

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¹ Shirley Whitlock, interview with the author in Mesa, Arizona, 16 May 1988. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Whitlock will refer to this interview.

Governor Mecham soon made national headlines when he rescinded the state holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., contending that the state attorney general's office would sue him if the illegally created holiday were not cancelled. Some critics, however, suspected more sinister motives for his action and blamed two groups linked to Mecham: the political far right for its allegation that King was a communist, and the Church for its history of denying the priesthood to blacks. This reaction foreshadowed the significant role Mormonism would play in the public's perception of Governor Mecham. Many Latter-day Saints now jumped on the Mecham bandwagon, interpreting criticism of him as religious persecution.

Governor Mecham, intentionally or unintentionally, misrepresented Ezra Taft Benson's view of King on one occasion. In an interview televised on KVOA in Tucson on 4 November 1987, Mecham was asked, "Do you agree with the general leadership of the Mormon Church that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a communist, and that the civil rights movement was communist-oriented as well?" Mecham replied that he had never heard Church leaders say that and added, "I know the president of the Mormon Church, Ezra Taft Benson, a man who would *never* say such a thing" (*italics added*). The Church's enemies used such inaccuracies to convince others that Mecham was cloaking the "real" reason he cancelled the King holiday.²

Two months after the holiday was rescinded, new charges of Mormon bigotry appeared. When Mecham said he liked Cleon Skousen's book *The Making of America*, quotations from the book surfaced in the press. One called slave owners "the worst victims of slavery," and two referred to black children as "pickaninnies."³ Hoping to placate Mecham's critics, the head of Arizona's Office of Affirmative Action later persuaded the governor to attend black church services in the Phoenix area on Sundays after he attended his own ward.⁴ Mecham would spend the rest of his term in office trying to prove to blacks that he and his religion were not their enemies. Within months, however, new Mecham remarks would offend new groups of Arizonans.

Mecham criticized reporters, professional entertainers, and rock concert fans. He called one journalist a "non-person," while his supporters were the "good people." He made other remarks that offended Hispanics, Japanese, Jews, and working women. At a banquet held at the University of Utah in September 1987, Mecham said, "This is a great Christian nation for everybody." Later at a Scottsdale synagogue, Mecham repeated this statement declaring, "I said it, and I'll say it again."⁵

² Ezra Taft Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, compiled by Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Parliament Publishers, 1969), p. 310. See Anthony Lobaido, "Cursed: Mecham's Inherent Religious Bias Reveals Truth About King Holiday," *Arizona State University State Press*, 9 November 1987, p. 4.

³ W. Cleon Skousen, *The Making of America* (Washington, D.C.: The National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1985).

⁴ "Mecham Visits Black Churches," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), 13 Dec. 1987, p. B1.

⁵ "Mecham Presses Corbin Attack," *Mesa Tribune*, 13 Jan. 1988, p. A1; "State Should Pay for Its Waste Reform, Mecham says," *Arizona Daily Star*, 31 May 1987, p. 8B; "Recall Leaders Call Gov 'Incompetent,'" *Arizona Daily Star*, 12 June 1987, p. B2; "'Gazette'

Reporters also baited Governor Mecham with questions about gay rights. He often answered that although he had no agenda for cracking down on homosexuals, he thought their lifestyle was unacceptable. He also protested the existence of Arizona State University's Lesbian and Gay Academic Union and told a radio caller who identified himself as a gay member of the Church, "If you are a member of the same church I am, you have evidently changed your lifestyle, because the church I belong to does not allow homosexuals to participate under any circumstances."⁶ Statements like these caught the attention of one notable listener, a wealthy young businessman named Ed Buck. Buck was the creator of the Mecham Watchdog Committee, a group which later became the Mecham Recall Committee and collected the signatures of over 300,000 Arizonans.

In February 1987, a pro-Mecham group called Arizonans for Traditional American Values held a press conference at which their leader, Julian Sanders, exposed Buck's homosexuality and condemned him for his current drug indictment and his arrest for public sexual indecency. The far-right leader later alleged that Buck had "received a year of training 'on a scholarship' by the Communists in Yugoslavia."⁷ These allegations fired up the governor's supporters. To Crismon Lewis, publisher of the unofficial Mormon tabloid *The Latter-Day Sentinel*, Buck's homosexuality "confirmed that *that* is Satan's side."⁸ To Shirley Whitlock, president of the Arizona Eagle Forum, evidence like this showed "the *character* — or lack of it — of the opposition." The Mechamites, as they became known in the best Book of Mormon tradition, thought allegations against Buck would boost their cause immeasurably and often said the recall was a homosexual movement.

Tables were turned when the *Phoenix Gazette* revealed on 7 July 1987 that the president of the two-thousand member Evan Mecham Fan Club, seventeen-year-old Kip Shippy, had been convicted of child molesting in 1984. Mecham and his camp shrugged off the obvious irony, but Steve Benson, a Mecham critic, concluded, "If you're going to argue that to oppose Governor

Columnist a 'Non-person,' Governor Says," *Arizona Republic*, 4 March 1987, p. B1; "Mecham Won't Resign Over Loan Probe," *Mesa Tribune*, 25 Oct. 1987, p. B1; "Mecham 'Slap' Irks Hispanics," *Arizona Republic*, 18 July 1987, p. B1; "Japan Remark Causes Stir," *Mesa Tribune*, 13 Jan. 1988, p. A1; "Mecham: 'Working Women Increase Divorce,'" *Arizona Republic*, 29 March 1987, p. B10; "Mecham Runs into Protesters in Utah," *Arizona Republic*, 18 Sept. 1987, p. C6; "Mecham's Christian Remark Irks Jews," *Arizona Republic*, 15 Dec. 1987, p. A2; "Mecham Remarks to Jews Assailed," *Mesa Tribune*, 16 Dec. 1987, p. B1; "Mecham Apologizes for Remarks," *Mesa Tribune*, 18 Dec. 1987, p. A1.

⁶ See "Mecham Says Gays Have No Place in Government," *Scottsdale Progress*, 6 Jan. 1987, p. 2; "Reflecting on a Vision for Arizona," *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), 29 March 1987, p. C1; "Gay Club Unprotected by Law, Mecham Says," *Arizona Republic*, 2 Aug. 1987, p. B3; "Mecham Assails Gays; Also Targets 1¢ Levy," *Arizona Republic*, 13 Feb. 1987, p. B1.

⁷ "Anti-Mecham Flag Bearer Blasted: Conservatives Lambaste Buck," *Mesa Tribune*, 15 March 1987, p. B1; "Would the People of Arizona Vote to Recall the Governor Who Revoked the Martin Luther King Holiday?" *The Fact Finder* (Phoenix), 16 Dec. 1987, p. 2.

⁸ Crismon Lewis, interview with the author, Phoenix, Arizona, 19 May 1988. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Lewis will refer to this interview.

Mecham is to support homosexuality, then to support Evan Mecham is to condone heterosexual child molestation.”⁹

Church members engaged in their own stirring debate. Publisher Crismon Lewis defended Mecham in a *Latter-Day Sentinel* editorial by saying, “Gay questions have no-win answers: to attack gays is discriminatory, to accept them is immoral.” He later conceded to a reader who countered that Church members may reject the homosexual lifestyle but must accept homosexuals as individuals. Another *Sentinel* reader wrote, “When a statewide radio and television audience heard [Evan Mecham] say, ‘Ed Buck, we have checked you out; you’re not worth a hill of beans,’ we winced. . . . No matter who Ed Buck is, a true Christian would never tell him nor anyone he is worthless, a non-person, nonexistent.”¹⁰

After witnessing the Mecham debate that raged for months, political strategist Jim West concluded on a 27 March 1988 radio talk show that Mecham generated either fanatical support or wild disdain. Linda Turley, a Latter-day Saint news anchor for a Phoenix television station, describes the split among Arizonans:

There were those who took President Benson’s presence at Mecham’s inauguration as “gospel”: a prophet’s direction to follow the new governor. . . . There were those who have known Mecham in the Church for years and “can only say good about the man.” There were those who believed that a man who received revelation of his governorship must be receiving divine guidance. There were those who approved of his political platform and embraced his theory that he was a victim of the media, the power brokers, the attorney general, and a conspiracy.

On the other shore were those who saw Mecham as incapable of accomplishing his honorable platform, a platform which contained all the right buzz words and causes: war on drugs, the mafia, the racing commission, government corruption, taxes, powermongers, pornography. They saw him as a man who found it difficult to delegate and to trust. Who failed to surround himself with competent people and advisors. Who failed to listen to seasoned and supportive politicians and friends who tried to warn him, early on, to soften his rhetoric and his approach to various controversies. Who failed to practice compromise, even in areas where no real harm would have come to his own agenda. Whose judgment was in question.¹¹

These conspiracy theories Turley describes were central to the Mechamite philosophy. Mecham was certain that there was a conspiracy to remove him from office. He identified the conspirators: “The Phoenix Forty [a businessmen’s group] . . . the old guard . . . the National Gay Rights Liberation Movement . . . the Democratic Party . . . the Phoenix newspapers . . . the homosexuals . . . the drug people . . . the pornographers . . . the university crowd . . . the ‘go along to get along’ people.” Some Latter-day Saints made stronger

⁹ Steve Benson, interview with the author, Phoenix, Arizona, 26 May 1988. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Benson will refer to this interview.

¹⁰ “Why Such a Controversy Over Gays?” *Latter-Day Sentinel* (Phoenix), 28 Nov. 1987, p. 2; Martha Cluff, letter to *Latter-Day Sentinel* (Phoenix), 19 Dec. 1987, p. 2; Sidney Macombe (pseudonym for Lorenzo Lisonbee), letter to *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 31 Oct. 1987, p. 2.

¹¹ Linda Turley, letter to the author, 10 June 1988.

accusation. One man wrote the *Latter-Day Sentinel*, "If we examine their motivations, I believe we will find sufficient evidence to label [the Phoenix Forty] a 'secret combination' that we have seen as the cause of the destruction of many ancient peoples, the Nephites among them."¹² Shirley Whitlock agreed. "I don't understand how members of the Church living in this day cannot believe in conspiracies. . . . It's secret combinations of groups that are out to get the governor."

The news media also played an important role. Mecham's dislike for the press was common knowledge, but to it he added the charge that the media was trying to destroy him. The *Arizona Republic* received letters from Mechamites accusing reporters of being in league with the anti-Christ.¹³ Some journalists received death threats.

The *Latter-Day Sentinel*, an unofficial voice of the Church in Arizona, enlisted in the media war in April 1987.¹⁴ Hoping to offset the news media's apparent bias, the *Sentinel's* editor and president, Crismon Lewis, abandoned his newspaper's nonpolitical tenet, and a number of pro-Mecham editorials and features soon appeared in the *Sentinel*.

Lewis sometimes appealed to the religious sympathies of his readers. In a 12 December 1987 editorial he wrote, "I'm sure if you were to visit with [Mecham] personally, he would share with you his story of why he decided to run. To the world, it looked like vain ambition. To the many who try to follow promptings in their lives, they knew there was another dimension to the decision. When he was elected, the world called it luck. But thousands knelt in thanks."

The *Sentinel* took on LDS cartoonist Steve Benson. Benson, the political cartoonist for *The Arizona Republic* and a critic of Mecham, was no stranger to attacks from Church members who thought his cartoons sometimes damaged the reputation of the Church and of his grandfather, President Ezra Taft Benson. Crismon Lewis telephoned Steve Benson, hoping to learn his grandfather's opinion of the Mecham situation. In a 14 November 1987 editorial, Lewis then restructured their "free-wheeling" conversation into a question and answer format. Lewis quoted Benson as saying, "I wish I could feel at liberty to repeat what he [President Benson] has said about the governor. I just know grandpa has been watching the situation down here and there's reason to be concerned. . . . I'm not in a position to divulge everything I know because there are people in position (sic) of authority, who wish not to go on record." Benson also cited reasons he wished the governor would resign. Next to this "interview," Lewis reprinted, without permission, Benson's now infamous car-

¹² "Arizona Governor Evan Mecham: On Trial for Being an Outsider," reprinted with permission from *The American*, 28 March 1988, p. 9; Larry E. Wilkinson, letter to *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 6 Feb. 1988, p. 22.

¹³ "Evan the Terrible's Mormon Legions Go on the Attack," *Arizona Republic*, 31 Jan. 1988, p. C4.

¹⁴ The Arizona edition of the *Latter-Day Sentinel* has a circulation of approximately 9,000. If the 200,000 LDS households in Arizona averaged four family members each, then 18 percent of the homes would have been subscribers.

toon showing the Salt Lake Temple with a banner on the end of Moroni's trumpet which read, "Resign, Ev."¹⁵

The Benson interview triggered a barrage of letters to the editor from enraged readers. In the following weeks three wrote that Benson had "made a mockery out of the temple," that he was "immature, impetuous, insensitive and obnoxious," and that his comments "[smelled] of priestcraft and damnable heresy."¹⁶ The "letters" section soon became a hot spot for debate about Mecham. The *Sentinel* printed the few anti-Mecham letters it received, but the large majority were highly supportive of the governor; some quoted scripture or modern-day prophets to support their points.

On the night of 3 December 1987, Steve Benson and Evan Mecham had a lengthy telephone conversation. Benson reports that at one point Mecham turned to his wife, Flo, and said, "I need to take some time with Steve because I'm really afraid his salvation is in jeopardy."¹⁷ Benson recalls that Mecham made other statements with religious overtones, saying that he obeyed the commandments, that Benson had "fallen off the beam," and "that only [Mecham's] bishop could judge him, and his bishop, he said, was his son." This conversation became public, as did the story that some members of Benson's extended family wanted him uninvited to Thanksgiving dinner.¹⁸ Cleon Skousen, rumor had it, said Benson would have to answer to God because of what he had done to Evan Mecham.

Sadly, the controversy divided families and friends within the Church. Linda Turley said, "It was apparent early on that Evan Mecham's trials and tribulations would harm us all, but few of us were equal to the trauma. . . . In my extended family, which has been close and caring, division took place among certain members. . . . Some of us remain at a distance. As a result, I found my anger against Mecham grew. Unreasonable or not, I hold him responsible for some of the upheaval within the Church and my family."¹⁹ A former bishop, Gary Patten, described disputes within his family in the *Newsweek* article previously cited. Steve Benson's family split over the issue. My husband and I also joined many other LDS families who struggled as we discussed Mecham with each other and with our parents, brothers, and sisters.

Many Latter-day Saints avoided debate, not only inside the Church, but even in the Church parking lots. Some members hid their disappointment in Mecham and bit their tongues. Cheri Allen, who did not vote for Mecham, said that she and her husband "became conspicuously silent about who we voted for, for fear of being labeled heretics!"²⁰ Other members angered by

¹⁵ Steve Benson cartoon, published in the *Arizona Republic*, 1 Nov. 1987, p. C4.

¹⁶ *Latter-Day Sentinel* letters: Clara M. England, 19 Dec. 1987, p. 2; Joe Nichols, 28 Nov. 1987, p. 17; and Sanford D. Flake, 12 Dec. 1987, p. 38.

¹⁷ Mecham reportedly admitted to making this statement when he appeared on the Cable News Network program "Crossfire," 1 March 1988.

¹⁸ "Arizona's Holy War: Mecham's Predicament Splits the Mormons," *Newsweek*, 1 Feb. 1988, p. 28; "A Family Gathering Shows Split Over Mecham Goes Deeper Than Politics," *New York Times*, 19 March 1988, late edition, p. 6.

¹⁹ Linda Turley, letter to the author, 10 June 1988.

²⁰ Cheri Allen, letter to the author, 25 Nov. 1987.

Mecham wrestled with the idea of coming out in public opposition. Would doing so boost the flagging reputation of the Church by showing the world that Mecham and Mormonism were not synonymous, or would it backfire by placing the Church further in the spotlight, airing dirty laundry for everyone to see? Some Church members decided to go public in newspaper and magazine interviews. Their statements were intermingled with others from LDS Mecham supporters and from Church spokesmen who endeavored to distance the Church from the debate. The result was a wide range of Latter-day Saint opinion on Mecham.

The subject of Mecham occasionally came up during fast meetings and other Church gatherings. One woman reportedly spoke in a testimony meeting for half an hour, saying that faithful Latter-day Saints needed to support the governor. Crismon Lewis heard that a ward in Mesa fasted for Mecham during a difficult time. He relates, "I think there were a lot of people fasting. The word was spreading all over, 'fast this weekend.' Like the weekend of the impeachment vote and the weekend of the hearings — there was a lot of fast-ing going on." An LDS representative in the Arizona House, Mark Killian, said, "I heard that they were having fasts for Ev before the general election and before the primary — that there was this network of fasting going on all over Arizona. . . . When Ev got in deep trouble I heard there were several wards that had fasts for him — and Salt Lake cracked down on them and said, 'You cannot — should not — do that.'"²¹ Some Regional Representatives sent letters to be read in Arizona priesthood meetings stating that Mecham was to be a non-issue during Church meetings.²²

Some supporters apparently used Church contacts to get the word out. One radio talk show host said that his station received calls from members of the Church who maintained "they have been encouraged in church to call the radio talk shows to support Governor Mecham." Members of the Church would call in and admit, "My neighbor said I was supposed to call." LDS bookstores promoted pro-Mecham literature including books, tabloids, and even song cassettes.²³

Followers spread stories which they believed confirmed Mecham's political innocence: that Mecham regularly attended the temple and was often seen crying in its prayer circles; that he met with President Benson in June and/or August of 1987 and was promised "he would win if he continues doing what's

²¹ Mark Killian, interview with the author, Phoenix, Arizona, 24 May 1988. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Killian refer to this interview.

²² Marc Denton, interview with the author, Tempe, Arizona; Eduardo Pagán, telephone conversation with the author, 15 Aug. 1988.

²³ KTAR talk show, 2 March 1988, audio tape in author's possession; Steve Western, telephone conversation with the author, 7 June 1988; *Arizona Free Press* (Scottsdale), n.d.; Sammy S. Jenkins, Sr., *Mecham: Arizona's Fighting Governor* (Albuquerque, N.M.: All States Publishing, 1988); Evan Mecham, *Come Back America* (Glendale, Ariz.: MP Press, 1982); Ronald J. Bellus, *Mecham: Silence Cannot be Misquoted* (Phoenix: Laurents Printing, 1988).

right"; and that both President Benson and former Arizonan H. Burke Peterson had given blessings to Evan Mecham and his brother Willard.²⁴

Some followers said that Mecham's persecution mirrored that experienced by the prophets. Betty Smith of Altamont, Utah, Mecham's hometown, drew a parallel between Mecham and Joseph Smith because Joseph was "ridiculed, persecuted and then murdered because of his beliefs." Mechamite Jim Robson reported that Cleon Skousen had called the governor a "modern-day Isaiah," and Robson added, "Isaiah was beaten, spit on and persecuted as a prophet."²⁵

Other followers outdid comparisons to the prophets. The author of *Mecham: Arizona's Fighting Governor* wrote of his impeachment, "One is put in mind of a scene about two thousand years ago. One group said of the man on trial, 'I find no fault in this man.' The other group said, 'Crucify him.' You know the rest of the story." A *Sentinel* reader penned, "The Senate impeachment trial reminds me of an almost identical trial that occurred nearly two thousand years ago. At that time, they also screamed, 'Crucify him, crucify him!' long before a trial." One man made the papers when he interrupted a Phoenix precinct meeting shouting that the Republicans needed to stand by Mecham rather than criticize him. He cried, "The more we can keep our Christ child to ourselves, the more we can protect it from crucifixion."²⁶

Threats were made. Before the election, someone put a flier on Church member Steve Western's car at a ward picnic that stated, "If someone votes improperly it is a sin."²⁷ Western, who later had a recall bumper sticker on his car, was told by another Latter-day Saint, "You'd better wise up or you'll be eternally damned." An LDS woman reported to Mark Killian that her stake president's wife refused to sit next to her and told her that she shouldn't attend Relief Society, because she wouldn't support Mecham. Referring to these instances as a kind of religious blackmail, Mark Killian observed, "Nobody when I was running for office said, 'You have to support Mark because he's LDS.' Nobody when Stan Turley [an Arizona statesman] ran for office said you have to support him because he was LDS. What's the difference with Ev?"

Members of other churches, particularly those from the Moral Majority, provided much of Mecham's support. Baptist Pastor Wesley Darby warned the Phoenix-area clergy, "Every day we hear the shouts of the Sodomites, the Socialists and the Secret Power Brokers as they attack our Governor. . . . If you don't want to live in Sodom and have a family problem like Lot's, then

²⁴ Edna Rae Montierth, telephone conversation with the author, 2 March 1988; Lance Standiford, letter to Ed Pagán, October 1987, copy in author's possession; Mark Killian interview; Steve Benson interview.

²⁵ "Hometown Will Always Welcome Mecham," *Arizona Republic*, 17 Jan. 1988, p. A1; "Mormons and Mecham: Some Fear His Politics May Harm Their Church," *Arizona Republic*, 6 March 1988, p. C1.

²⁶ Jenkins, p. 31; Gib Suemnicht, letter to *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 2 April 1988, p. 3; "Key GOP Conservatives Urge Mecham to Resign," *Arizona Republic*, 28 Oct. 1987, p. A1.

²⁷ "Mormons and Mecham: Some Fear His Politics May Harm Their Church," *Arizona Republic*, 6 March 1988, p. C1.

come out of your closet (of prayer) and onto the battlefield.”²⁸ Editors of the Christian tabloid *Footprints* printed a pro-Mecham issue. Conversely, Mecham’s critics put him in the same basket as Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swagart, Oral Roberts, and Jim Bakker.

Some supporters went to great extremes to express their anger. During the impeachment trials, all of the state’s senators and representatives — even Latter-day Saints — received threatening telephone calls and letters from Mecham followers. *Republic and Gazette* editor Pat Murphy wrote, “I cannot recall in the past seeing such a volume of Letters to the Editor that are unusable because of the vicious, vile, obscene, and vulgar language used by authors to condemn Mecham critics and to extol the governor.” Recall leader Ilene Gordon reported that recall workers were called “lesbians and AIDS carriers” and added, “If you were active in Recall, your phone rang with death threats all the time.”²⁹ Did Mormons engage in this kind of activity?

In one unfortunate and ironic twist, the target of Mechamite violence was a Latter-day Saint. Fifty-eight-year-old Betty Foster had befriended Ed Buck to show him that not all Church members supported Mecham. One day while standing in a grocery store check-out line, Foster heard a man in front of her call Buck a “big faggot.” She asked the man to keep his opinions to himself. An argument ensued, and the man’s companion, a middle-aged woman, swung her purse and hit Foster in the head, cutting her face and giving her a black eye.³⁰

Some non-Mormons, especially those acquainted with a number of Latter-day Saints, attempted to distance Mecham from his religion by pointing out the wide variety of personalities and opinions within the Latter-day Saint culture. Even some of Mecham’s harshest critics said that Mormonism was not to blame for Mecham’s weaknesses. The co-chair of Arizona State University’s Lesbian and Gay Academic Union, former Latter-day Saint Denise Heap, publicly denounced Mecham but privately defended the Church. She said, “The Mormon people are getting bad press because of Mecham, and they don’t deserve it. . . . Mormons generally are not discriminatory towards minorities. They give everyone a chance. And Mecham has drawn together those elements of the Mormon community who, for some reason, feel dispossessed. He’s united them and he’s making everybody think that that’s what all Mormons are.”³¹

²⁸ “Mormons Aren’t the Only Ones Behind Governor Mecham,” *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 14 Nov. 1987, p. 33.

²⁹ “Mormons Forced to Choose Sides over Embattled Governor,” *Arizona Daily Star*, 6 March 1988, p. A13; Gloria Anderson, letter to *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 20 Feb. 1988, p. 3; Steve Benson interview; Mark Killian interview; “Wanted: Arizonans Who Won’t Tolerate the Politics of Abuse,” *Arizona Republic*, 28 Feb. 1988, p. C2. (Joseph Allred, a Church member and military officer who was assigned to study *The Arizona Republic’s* editorial pages, reports that the *Republic* alone received 3,473 letters to the editor on the Mecham issue between January 1987 and April 1988); “The Belles of Recall: How an Unlikely Quartet Unseated the Governor of Arizona,” *Ms.*, June 1988, p. 44–51.

³⁰ Betty Foster, telephone conversation with the author, 7 June 1988.

³¹ Denise Heap, telephone conversation with the author, 26 June 1988.

After Ed Buck heard Mecham say that gays could not participate in the Church under any circumstances, he telephoned Don LeFevre of the Church's Public Communications Department and asked for a clarification of the Church's position on homosexuality. LeFevre told Buck that gays and excommunicated gays can attend Church meetings.³² Buck interpreted this as meaning that gays *could* participate in Church activities, and he concluded that Mecham had not accurately stated the Church's position. Because of this, Buck says he actively worked to prevent any Mormon-bashing within the recall movement. He says of Mecham, "You can look back in the Mormon tenets and say, 'This is where Even Mecham came from. But he's an aberration, he's a perversion. He's not pure Mormonism.'" ³³ Some Latter-day Saints felt this viewpoint pitted Mecham against the Church, but the other alternative — direct attacks on the Church by Mecham critics — seemed an even gloomier prospect. Either tactic allowed Mecham's enemies to use his Mormonism against him.

With predictable zeal, the Church's antagonists took advantage of the Mecham excitement to further their own causes. MormonWatch, an anti-Mormon organization based in the Phoenix area, conducted interviews and wrote letters to editors. In one letter they told of the Mormon belief that men can become gods and concluded, "Mecham is playing the game to the hilt. Convinced of a popular mandate, he is carrying his celestial vision for Arizona forward — and damn anyone who gets in the way." Representatives of MormonWatch and another anti-Mormon organization, Concerned Christians, also misrepresented the Church by saying that Mormons had a religious obligation to support the governor and bishops would take action against Mecham critics within their wards.³⁴

A former member of the Church, Deborah Laake, created a stir with a forceful editorial for *The New Times*. She wrote, "Mecham began as a Mormon boy and became a Mormon man. There is no other upbringing on earth so perfectly designed to transform someone with weak wits into a monster. . . . I know that the conditioning begins at birth, the conditioning that whispers to Mormon boys that they are chosen and their weirdest ideas are sanctioned by God. . . . For a small-minded man, Mormonism becomes a way of not reflecting on your own actions. That is how Ev Mecham rules." ³⁵

The Arizona executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, Louis Rhodes, reported that after Mecham's inauguration the ACLU received its first taste of anti-Mormon sentiment in the form of negative letters and phone calls. Tom Leykis, program director for talk radio station KFYI, heard many anti-Mormon comments during his station's call-in programs.³⁶ On a

³² Don LeFevre, telephone conversation with the author, 7 June 1988. LeFevre verified the substance of Buck's call to him on 12 Feb. 1987.

³³ Ed Buck, interview with the author, Phoenix, Arizona, 31 May 1988.

³⁴ Letter from MormonWatch to *New Times* (Phoenix), 2–8 Sept. 1987, p. 2; "Church Debate over Mecham Simmers to Surface," *Phoenix Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1988, p. A9.

³⁵ "A Former Mormon Looks at Mecham" *New Times*, 12–18 Aug. 1987, p. 10.

³⁶ "Mecham Furor Prompts Anti-Mormon Sentiment," *Mesa Tribune*, 10 Oct. 1987, p. C1.

typical radio day I heard one caller comment to Crismon Lewis of the *Sentinel*, "I'm concerned about the apparent conflict between the secret oath that Evan Mecham took in the Mormon temple and the oath that he took to serve 'impartially' as governor of Arizona. Evan Mecham's Mormon temple oath consecrated his time, his talents, and everything to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for what they call the building up of Zion — Zion in this case is the Mormon Church."³⁷ Some callers threatened physical harm to any Arizona Mormons.

Why were these people so distressed about the Church's effect on Mecham? It seemed to them that Mecham used his belief in God and the Church to promote his cause. Was Mecham doing this? Steve Benson heard that at a family picnic attended by many Mormon supporters Mecham said that the people we should hate aren't worth hating and that a just God in heaven will do all the getting even for us that we need. According to Mark Killian, at a stake youth fireside Mecham said that God was on his side and the Devil was the one causing all of his problems. Appearing before nearly two thousand fans crowded into Mesa's Centennial Hall, Mecham said, "Although there is not an established [state] religion, it is important to have God as a co-partner in all governmental acts. . . . God will give us the direction, but we're the ones who have to put the motion power to the drive wheels that push us along. If we listen to His direction, He will tell us the course to steer." At the press conference following his acquittal, the first thing Mecham said was, "First I want to express the gratitude of myself, Florence, and our entire family to the Lord for His answering the hundreds of thousands of prayers offered in our behalf."³⁸

Is there a difference between the "civil religion" of Americans such as Abraham Lincoln and that of Mecham? Some would say yes. Referring to Pat Robertson, historian Edwin Gaustad said, "Abraham Lincoln was profoundly religious but never willing to say he spoke for God or that God spoke to him."³⁹ Steve Benson agreed when he said of Evan Mecham, "On the one hand the governor will declare that he has no problem with the First Presidency making it clear that there is a division between one's personal/political viewpoints and the position that the Church may take — yet on the other hand the former governor is sending these not-too-subtle messages that those who support him, whether in or out of the Church, have God's blessing and approval."

Mecham denied that he dragged the Church into politics. In a brief interview with me he said, "I never involve the Church in politics. The brethren have said to get involved civically; we never do it in the name of the Church. I adhere to that strictly." He felt Latter-day Saints understood that they didn't

³⁷ Caller, "Barry," on KTAR Radio call-in program dated 2 March 1988. Tape recording in author's possession.

³⁸ "Candidate Mecham Takes Campaign to Mesa," *Arizona Republic*, 2 Feb. 1988, final edition p. A2; Evan Mecham, press conference, 17 June 1988. Tape recording in author's possession.

³⁹ "Robertson's Beliefs Make His Campaign Hard Sale to Many," *Arizona Republic*, 5 March 1988, p. A10.

have to support him. "We [Latter-day Saints] don't get angry with each other if we disagree on political issues or any other issue." Elsewhere he has said, "I've got a right to worship however I want. . . . Now, you can say this is a great Jewish nation all you want. I'll never challenge it. You say what you believe, it's alright with me. You need to allow me that same right."⁴⁰

After the state grand jury indicted Evan Mecham and his brother Willard for perjury, fraud, and filing false campaign documents, Evan said, "Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. We need not try to get even with anyone in this life. There is a just God in heaven who will mete out eternal justice to us all in the life hereafter." The religious zeal of his supporters was evident that day as they carried signs reading, "Deliver Our Governor from the Wicked—Dear Lord Almighty," and "We support you Governor!! Psalm 68: 'Let GOD arise, let his enemies be SCATTERED.'" Mecham's followers believed that the charges were part of an unconstitutional "railroad job" to remove him from office. Latter-day Saint Mechamites were certain that Mecham's battle was foreseen in Joseph Smith's prophecy that the Constitution of the United States would hang by a thread and that the elders of the Church would labor to save it.⁴¹

During the legislative impeachment proceedings brought against Mecham, supporters from the Mesa area flooded legislative offices with pro-Mecham letters, many worded exactly the same but signed by different people. According to Democrat Representative Jack Brown, a Latter-day Saint from St. Johns, the governor's supporters repeatedly threatened to remove legislators from office if they voted for impeachment.⁴² Marching in protest at the State Capitol, Mechamite families engaged in altercations with their opposition.

The *Latter-Day Sentinel* published what appeared to be a survey of legislators' views on impeachment and asked readers to "refer to the list on this page and call your state representative — many times, if necessary — to express your feelings on how the impeachment hearings are being conducted." Legislators became incensed at the bogus survey; most of them had never been contacted to express their views. Lewis issued a retraction, but his mistake brought notoriety to the *Sentinel*.⁴³

During the impeachment trial, Mecham's image was further damaged by his testimony. Representative Mark Killian of Mesa reported that before the

⁴⁰ Evan Mecham, telephone conversation with the author, 17 May 1988; "Evan Mecham: On Trial for Being An Outsider," reprinted with permission from *The American*, 28 March 1988, p. 8.

⁴¹ "Text of Governor's Response to Loan Indictment," *Arizona Republic*, 10 Jan. 1988, p. A6; "All Bow Now to Gov. Ev: Religious Overtones Underlie Mecham's Fight" and accompanying photos, *Mesa Tribune*, 10 Jan. 1988, p. A9; See W. Cleon Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1977), p. 41–43 for references.

⁴² "Pro-Mecham Letters Flow into Legislative Offices," *Scottsdale Progress*, 4 Feb. 1988, p. 2; "Did the Mormons Blow It?: How Evan Mecham's Own Supporters May Have Hurt His Cause," *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 11 June 1988, p. 7.

⁴³ "Mecham Is No Longer the Issue!" *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 23 Jan. 1988, p. 2; "Law-makers Outraged by Impeachment 'Poll,'" *Arizona Republic*, 28 Jan. 1988, p. A9; "So Whose Button Did We Push?" *Latter-day Sentinel*, 6 Feb. 1988, p. 2.

governor testified in the House, calls to Killian's office were running ninety to one against impeachment. After Mecham took the stand, about half the calls were in favor. Mecham concluded his testimony by accusing Representative Jim Skelly of being a political enemy, citing Skelly's participation in a race-track scam.

When the state house of representatives impeached Governor Mecham by a vote of forty-six to fourteen, all five LDS representatives voted against impeachment. Mark Killian cast one of those votes, but he denounced the governor and defended his friend Jim Skelly in a tearful speech. He said,

I resent Evan Mecham and everything he stands for. The way I was raised is nothing at all the way I see Mr. Mecham conduct his affairs. . . . He has continually skated along life following the lowest common denominator of social behavior, and that's barely eking by the law. He can best be described by a man I admire greatly — . . . Stan Turley — . . . as being an "ethical pygmy." And his outlandish, rude, classless, John Birch accusations he made against Mr. Skelly today turn my stomach.⁴⁴

After this denunciation, Killian received death threats and was told he should be excommunicated. He told me, "I had a lot of people write me letters and quote me out of Doctrine and Covenants 121 about unrighteous dominion." In a wild accusation against two conservative "family men," the head of a recall bid against Skelly accused representatives Killian and Skelly of being lovers.⁴⁵ It seems that cheap shots are acceptable, especially in areas of morality.

Governor Mecham was reproved by another legislator two months later when he was impeached by the state senate. Senator Tony West, who says he prayed about what to say, read Mecham excerpts from *People of the Lie* by M. Scott Peck, saying Mecham was "evil" and showed signs of ambulatory schizophrenia.⁴⁶

After his impeachment, Mecham and his brother Willard still faced criminal trial on felony counts. It was reported that before the trial Evan's lawyers met with the state attorney general and proposed that the charges be dismissed if Evan Mecham left Arizona to go on a mission for the Church. Mecham said he was "flabbergasted" that the meeting took place.⁴⁷

Because of the impending trial, Brigham Young University refused to allow Mecham to speak to its campus Republicans' club. Some BYU alumni who felt that the university was being too harsh with Mecham were outraged. When he spoke at Altamont High School's graduation exercises, a reporter asked him whether standards are lower at Altamont High than at BYU.

⁴⁴ "Killian Transcript," *Mesa Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1988, p. A10. For Stan Turley's 'ethical pygmy' statement, see "Mecham Smeared Barr, Says Head of State Senate," *Arizona Daily Star*, 30 Sept. 1986, p. A9.

⁴⁵ "Skelly Assails Mecham Backers' 'Lies,'" *Scottsdale Progress*, 24 Feb. 1988, p. 1.

⁴⁶ "Throwing the Book at Mecham," *Arizona Republic*, 7 April 1988, p. D1. See also M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

⁴⁷ "Dismissal Deal Allegedly Asked for Mecham," *Arizona Republic*, 14 April 1988, p. A1; "Mecham Denies He'll Leave If State Drops Case," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 15 April 1988, p. A5.

Mecham replied, "I still have my temple recommend. If I had moral problems, I wouldn't still have a temple recommend."⁴⁸

During the criminal trial, lawyers for the defense argued that the Mecham brothers were Mormon men of good background. Attorneys who later analyzed the case agreed that the Mecham lawyers' best move was keeping their clients off of the witness stand.⁴⁹ The jury acquitted the Mechams, stating that they had no proof that the Mechams knowingly erred on their campaign reports. On the night of his acquittal, Evan Mecham attended the temple.⁵⁰

Since the acquittal, Arizona is slowly returning to normal. Only time will determine if Mecham has damaged the Church's image. Some Church members attribute the rigid tone of the Church's recent political neutrality statement to the Mecham incident.⁵¹ But have we learned any lessons from Evan Mecham? All of us could benefit from some soul-searching.

Some of Mecham's critics outside the Church are now bitter towards Latter-day Saints. But they should be careful about making blanket judgments. They should ask themselves, "Do I believe all Mormons are unfit for public office? Do I assume they all think and act like Ev? Can I judge my Mormon acquaintances as individuals instead of pigeon-holing them?"

Church members who did not support Mecham believed he was an embarrassment to the Church. They believed the Mechamites were misrepresenting the broad spectrum of political belief within the Church. They believe there is more to being a good politician than being a good Mormon. They do not believe that God calls politicians to do his bidding. Those within the Church who disagreed with Mecham could ask themselves, "Did I bring the Church into the limelight by attacking Mecham as a fellow Latter-day Saint? Did I overreact to accusations that Mecham represents all members of the Church? Did I mistakenly conclude that Mecham and his followers believed I had a religious obligation to support him? Do I deny authoritarian members their place in society and in the Church?"

Mecham's supporters saw his struggles in mythic terms — good versus evil. Some Mechamites felt their actions — even accusations, religious threats, or violence — were justified because they were battling the forces of Satan. They equated right belief with good governorship. They believed that the governor was a good man who was the victim of a conspiracy; it was impossible for them to believe that he was a bad man victimized by his own errors. They could not allow for a gray area in which the governor was the victim both of

⁴⁸ "BYU Speech by Mecham Is Barred," *Arizona Republic*, 19 May 1988, p. A1; "No Need to RSVP; You're Not Invited," *Latter-Day Sentinel*, 28 May 1988, p. 8; "Mecham Goes Home Again to Speak to Class of 1988 at Utah High School," *Arizona Republic*, 28 May 1988, p. A8.

⁴⁹ "Defense Strategy, Lack of Evidence Led to Acquittal, Local Lawyers Say," *Phoenix Gazette*, 17 June 1988, p. A13.

⁵⁰ A story circulated that at the temple that night, Mecham was greeted by so many well-wishers offering noisy congratulations that temple matrons asked him to leave. However, a temple worker in attendance that night told me this was not true.

⁵¹ Office of the First Presidency, letter on political neutrality, 9 June 1988. Copy in possession of the author.

his own inadequacies and of the people who perceived those inadequacies as injurious to the state. Mechamites relied on the simple faith that God blesses the righteous efforts of his Church. They believed Mecham had divine approval and the Constitution needed saving. Mecham's supporters must ask themselves, "How prepared was this man to assume the tremendous responsibilities he faced? Did I support him just because he was LDS? Have I bound politics and religion more closely than I should have, to the detriment of both? Do I resent the political apathy I perceive in most members of the Church? Why did I believe that supporting the governor was necessary, sometimes to the point of religious blackmail? Did I react to Mecham critics as if they were persecuting me and my beliefs? Have I used Mecham as a device to unite me with my Latter-day Saint friends against an imagined opposition in a misdirected attempt to give the Church greater importance in my life?"

Perhaps the most significant result of the Mecham ordeal was the pitting of Church member against Church member. If the Church is to become unified in Arizona, the search must continue for what B. H. Roberts called "unity in the essentials, tolerance in non-essentials."⁵² Our challenge is to find common ground with our sisters and brothers, realizing that the umbrella of the gospel is expansive enough to cover Latter-day Saints of differing political opinions.

⁵² B. H. Roberts, quoted in Truman G. Madsen, "Problems in Universalizing Mormonism: A Response," *Sunstone* 4 (Dec. 1979): 20.