

A Strange Phenomena: Ernest L. Wilkinson, the LDS Church, and Utah Politics

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Politics is a strange phenomena.

—Ernest L. Wilkinson, 1961¹

FOR ERNEST LEROY WILKINSON, successful Washington, D.C., lawyer and seventh president of Brigham Young University, campaign politics was a game he could never master. From his rowdy youth in Ogden, Utah's notorious Hell's Half-Acre district, where blind eyes turned to cock-fighting and bootlegging, he had been fascinated by the nature and use of power.² By the time he was fifty, he had secured a string of hard-won national victories as a tenacious and intimidating legalist. But the lure of politics remained the one attraction, despite other professional and personal accomplishments, he could not resist.³

1. Wilkinson to S. Lyman Tyler, 13 Feb. 1961, Brigham Young University Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; hereafter BYU archives.

2. This is Wilkinson's own characterization of the Ogden of his youth. See "[Auto]biography of Ernest L. Wilkinson for High Priests Quorum in 17th Ward of Salt Lake Stake," 27 Nov. 1977, privately circulated. For a more thorough history of Ogden, see Richard C. Roberts and Richard W. Sadler, *Ogden: Junction City* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1985).

3. Wilkinson's life has been treated in considerable detail in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, Vol. 2 (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 497-723; Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, eds., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, Vol. 3 (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 3-789; Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 429-759;

Even before Wilkinson accepted in late July 1950 the invitation to become president of BYU, a position for which he had lobbied ranking LDS leaders, his possible involvement with campaign politics had surfaced. While church officials, who doubled as school trustees, did not agree on the feisty lawyer until mid-way through the previous April,⁴ word of Wilkinson's probable appointment had already reached the Provo campus. "I keep hearing rumors that you may be my new boss," wrote BYU treasurer Keifer B. Sauls on 5 April. However, "just about the time I am about convinced of the reliability of this rumor," he continued, "I meet someone who says that my rumor is all wrong, that you are to run for the Senate two years hence." Though "both are good ideas," he admitted, "from a selfish point of view I like the idea of your being in Provo better than in Washington."⁵ The fifty-one-year-old Wilkinson hedged on both counts: "It would be extremely difficult for me to abandon my law practice," he tactfully wrote.⁶

Some Washington pundits believed that Wilkinson's reputation, based on an impressive chain of native American claims litigations, as a savvy behind-the-scenes congressional strategist could garner him a place in the U.S. Senate. But Wilkinson refused to consider seriously the possibility. He sensed that while he could safely navigate the turbulent waters of the federal bureaucracy, he had not mastered the social rules of political gamesmanship and, hence, was not convinced he would be victorious. However driven and ambitious, Wilkinson was not self-destructive: he would rather not run than risk losing and the resulting humiliation. Besides, he had spent the previous two to three years advising selected LDS leaders of his vision of BYU and was more interested in—and hopeful of—the prospects, and advantages, of serving in Utah than in the nation's capitol.

During the Cold War years following World War II the majority of general officers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were, like most Americans, anti-Communist. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., former U.S. ambas-

and especially in his commissioned and privately published biography: Woodruff J. Deem and Glenn V. Bird, *Ernest L. Wilkinson: Indian Advocate and University President* (N.p.; n.d. [1978?]).

4. See nominating committee (Joseph Fielding Smith, Stephen L. Richards, Joseph F. Merrill, John A. Widtsoe, and Albert E. Bowen) to the First Presidency, 14 Apr. 1950, BYU archives. With only one or two exceptions, members of BYU's board of trustees also served as high-ranking leaders of the Mormon church.

5. Sauls to Wilkinson, 5 Apr. 1950, Ernest L. Wilkinson Papers, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library. Copies of virtually all documents from the Wilkinson Papers cited in this essay are also in private possession, which is my source for them, and many are referenced in the sources cited in n3 above.

6. Wilkinson to Sauls, 19 Apr. 1950, Wilkinson Papers.

sador to Mexico, ardent Republican, and first counselor in the church's First Presidency, asserted in 1949, "Our real enemies are communism and its running mate, socialism."⁷ Less than three years later, Mormon president David O. McKay stressed, "Only in perpetuating economic freedom can our social, political, and religious liberties be preserved."⁸ The eighty-year-old patriarch recommended: "Every child in America [should be] taught the superiority of our way of life, of our Constitution and the sacredness of the freedom of the individual."⁹ "I have generally felt," agreed one politically-minded general authority, "that a member of the Church could not be a true Latter-day Saint and be a Communist or a Socialist. . . . I think the principles of both are incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁰ "If we have in the Church any Communists holding to the views taught in Russia and which interferes or takes away from an individual his free agency," echoed another, "then I would feel that he has no place in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."¹¹ Finally, an unsigned editorial in the *Church News* section of the *Deseret News* subsequently announced: "It is as much a part of the religion of American Latter-day Saints to accept the Constitution of the United States, and defend it, as it is to believe in baptism or the resurrection."¹²

This pervasive concern among LDS authorities over the growth of Communism and what they viewed as allied economic and political evils manifested itself most dramatically in Ernest Wilkinson's appointment as president of the church's educational showpiece. A Republican convert and conservative critic of the federal government, Wilkinson in many ways personified the economic, political, and social beliefs of the majority of his ecclesiastical superiors. He needed little encouragement, for example, when LDS leader Stephen L Richards charged him at his 1951 inauguration as BYU president to "implant in youth a deep love of country and a reverential regard for the Constitution of the United States."¹³ "This insti-

7. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., "America Faces Freedom-Slavery Issue," an address delivered to delegates of the National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies, 14 Sept. 1949, in *Church News*, 25 Sept. 1949. For Clark's views on Communism, see D. Michael Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1983), 188-92.

8. David O. McKay, "Education—A Freedom People's Best Investment," an address delivered in Founders' Day exercises, Utah State Agricultural College, 7 Mar. 1954, in *Church News*, 12 Mar. 1954.

9. David O. McKay, "Education for Citizenship," an address delivered at the inauguration of Henry Aldous Dixon as president of Utah State Agricultural College, 8 Mar. 1954, in *Church News*, 13 Mar. 1954.

10. Ezra Taft Benson to Ernest L. Wilkinson, 28 June 1961, Wilkinson Papers.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith to Ernest L. Wilkinson, 15 June 1961, Wilkinson Papers.

12. "The Doctrines of Men," *Church News*, 11 Aug. 1962, 16.

13. Stephen L Richards, "The Charge," in *Report of the Proceedings of the Inauguration of*

tution," Wilkinson had two years earlier promised Mormon authorities, "is definitely committed to a philosophy which is the antithesis of that espoused by the communists. . . . More than any other school, Brigham Young University has a better basis for teaching correct principles of government."¹⁴

What Wilkinson hoped to establish was an exemplary institution of higher learning where a loyal and patriotic faculty would "teach 'correct' economic doctrines—doctrines which would assist in salvaging the American system of free enterprise from threatened extinction."¹⁵ To this end, he actively promoted a politically conservative image for himself and his university, while championing the appearances of anti-Communist crusaders and lobbying for the establishment of a curriculum and faculty that favored Republican party principles.

Advised at the outset of his tenure to curb his potentially divisive interests, Wilkinson moved cautiously to define politics as narrowly as possible. This afforded him considerable leeway in addressing issues others saw as political and in allowing him to invoke his interpretation of LDS teachings and the public statements of contemporary church leaders in support of his own beliefs. Indeed, criticism of his policies, he would explain, amounted to an "unwillingness . . . to follow the counsel of those [who have been] sustained as our leaders and whom we have promised to support and follow."¹⁶ "I have observed the spirit of your desire," he wrote during the 1952 national fall campaign to David O. McKay, who had become president the previous year, "that the Church and this institution take no partisan stand in favor of one [political] party as against the other." Still, he added, knowing that the venerable McKay would concur, "at the same time, we do not hesitate to suggest certain L.D.S. concepts by which our members should judge the political issues."¹⁷

Earlier that day Wilkinson had outlined what those "certain L.D.S. concepts" included. In introducing outgoing U.S. president Harry S. Truman, in Utah stumping for Democratic presidential hopeful Adlai Stevenson, Wilkinson's distrust of Truman, his administration, and Democrats generally was evident. Which party, he rhetorically asked his student audience, better preserves "the ideals, principles and traditions of our

Ernest LeRoy Wilkinson, 8 Oct. 1951, in *The Messenger*, Nov. 1951, BYU Archives.

14. Wilkinson to John A. Widtsoe, 13 Aug. 1949, Wilkinson Papers.

15. Wilkinson to J. Reuben Clark, Jr., and Howard D. McDonald, 11 June 1949, Wilkinson Papers.

16. Wilkinson, "The Decline and Possible Fall of the American Republic," a speech delivered to the BYU student body, 28 May 1965, 4, BYU archives.

17. Wilkinson to McKay, 6 Oct. 1952, Adam S. Bennion Papers, Archives and Manuscripts, Lee Library.

sacred constitution"; which better contributes "to public morality among our leaders and civic righteousness among all our citizens"; which better protects "our country, both from without and within, from the ungodly forces of Communism and other alien ideologies"; which better unites "our country by bonds of patriotism, civic responsibility and good will, making government the servant of all and not the instrument of favored classes or special groups"; which, "within the proper bounds of representative constitutional government," better promotes "the general welfare and do[es] justice to all, both rich and the poor, and not array class against class"; and which, "by a wise mixture of unselfish counsel, benevolence, and firm insistence on self-help and the assumption of individual responsibility by all peoples," gives "us the best in world statesmanship, so that the good people of all nations, not because we control the purse strings or have superior armaments at our command, but because of our genuine example as a Christian nation, will follow us in our search and quest for peace."¹⁸

Committing himself wholly to his duties as university president and, beginning in 1953, as administrator of the entire church educational system,¹⁹ Wilkinson's impact on the previously bipartisan BYU community was almost immediate. "There had been some activity politically at the university before Ernest Wilkinson became president," remembered one longtime friend, "but not nearly as much as [after] his administration began. . . . There were many university professors who were Democrats, and some stayed on with the university after Ernest came, but they weren't very vocal Democrats."²⁰ In the mid-1950s one faculty member characterized the "professional radicalism" of his colleagues as extending "no further than [to a] belief in Social Security or Adlai Stevenson."²¹

But even these and beliefs like them could be enough to raise Wilkinson's ire. Until 1959 he refused to authorize commemorative activities honoring the United Nations because it competed with the "American form of republican government."²² Nor would he tolerate liberal or leftist lectur-

18. Ernest L. Wilkinson, introduction to "Address to the Brigham Young University Studentbody by President Harry S. Truman," 6 Oct. 1952, in *Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1952-53), 11-12. Wilkinson had earlier hosted Senator Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, who spoke in behalf of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Wilkinson's preference for president.

19. See BYU Board of Trustees Meeting, minutes, 26 June 1953, BYU archives, for Wilkinson's appointment as LDS church schools administrator.

20. George S. Ballif, Oral History, 18 Feb., 8 Mar. 1974, 32-33, BYU archives.

21. In "Scope of Academic Freedom; Dogmatism is Only Real Threat," *Daily Universe*, 21 Apr. 1953; cf. Wilford D. Lee, Oral History, 12 Aug. 1975, 17, BYU archives.

22. See BYU Board of Trustees Meeting, minutes, 23 Nov. 1955, 3 June, 2 Dec. 1959; "Board of Trustees Reverses Stand on BYU United Nations Activities," *Daily Universe*, 10 Dec. 1959.

ers on campus. "There are certainly going to be no communists speaking to our students," he insisted, "[or] any fellow travelers who invoke the Fifth Amendment for the purpose of refusing to tell of their communistic affiliations."²³ Speakers who accepted Wilkinson's invitations challenged students to "become as indoctrinated in Americanism as Soviet children are in communism."²⁴ Not surprisingly, the accrediting team of the Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Schools observed following their 1956 tour of the campus that "capitalism and the free enterprise philosophy appear to be given strong preference at the administrative level."²⁵ Wilkinson countered defensively, "This accreditation committee was composed of professors from other institutions, some of whom I feel were a little too much blinded by their ivory towers and not enough illuminated by the realities of life. . . . I do not believe that academic freedom requires that we put on the faculty of colleges of business individuals who are opposed to free enterprise—the very system which, together with our religious devotion, has made our country great."²⁶

In response to the apparent politization of their school, especially evident in campus-wide assemblies, some students publicly criticized Wilkinson for his "unabashed partisanship." "The political speakers at university programs, with one exception, have been of one political party," wrote one student in 1954. "I believe that this has unconsciously influenced many students, and that by being so arranged, these programs have degenerated from an educational function into a political harangue."²⁷ Another noted, "[Selling] politics on the market of righteousness is repulsive to intelligent students and townfolk alike. If this is to become a university, we must have fewer 'little' deeds from Big

23. Ernest L. Wilkinson diary, 9 Sept. 1957, photocopy, David J. Buerger Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City; also in private possession; original in Wilkinson Papers. Wilkinson's voluminous personal diaries, like any first-person narrative, are their author's own best source and consequently should be consulted with some caution, especially when they are used as the primary and/or only reference for comments and motivations attributed to others. Aside from this, they are valuable and generally reliable resources for documenting Wilkinson's life and thought, as well as his interaction with others and their relationships with him. Unfortunately, the diaries and personal papers of many of Wilkinson's contemporaries, particularly ranking LDS church leaders, are unavailable for verification or clarification.

24. See "Crusader Tells Menace of Communist Program," *Daily Universe*, 24 Oct. 1960. One speaker predicted a communist takeover of the United States by 1970. See "Reds Plan to Take Over U.S. by 1970," *Daily Universe*, 30 June 1959, and "Reds to Take Over," *Daily Universe*, 21 July 1959.

25. "Re-evaluation Report on Brigham Young University," Nov. 1956, 30, BYU archives.

26. Wilkinson, Statement, 1956, BYU archives.

27. Roger A. Sorenson to Editor, *Daily Universe*, 2 Nov. 1954.

Brother."²⁸ Other students were soon joking that socialism should be redefined to mean "any plan for social change or betterment not cleared with . . . President Wilkinson"; that conscience referred to "a special sense of right and wrong which is possessed only by . . . a few Republicans of the extreme right, most of whom the students of Brigham Young University have been privileged to hear speak"; and that freedom of speech actually meant the "freedom to listen . . . to a defense of President Wilkinson's political philosophy."²⁹ "Most of us who have been around for a while realize that President Wilkinson is a conservative Republican," student editors later commented. "We know these things because he has told us many times."³⁰ Finally, one student added, "One need no especially acute perception to note that the weekly forum speakers tend to advocate the same political and economic philosophy. Can we claim intellectual honesty for ourselves . . . when we present only one side of an issue while the other is disparaged or at best neglected?"³¹ Unfazed by but not oblivious to such criticisms, Wilkinson assured himself that his views and actions were endorsed by the president of his church, his board of trustees, and the majority of his faculty and students.³²

Less than three years after coming to BYU, Wilkinson skirted the suggestion that he run for the U.S. Senate by explaining he "had burned my political bridges when I accepted my present position."³³ He later insisted:

28. J. Smith to Editor, *Daily Universe*, 4 Nov. 1954.

29. See Maurice M. Tanner to Editor, *Daily Universe*, 23 May 1961, and James H. Bean to Editor, *Daily Universe*, 25 May 1961.

30. "Political Vista," *Daily Universe*, 23 June 1961.

31. Jim Duggan to Editor, *Daily Universe*, 19 Apr. 1962.

32. During his twenty years at BYU, Wilkinson emerged as a skillfull manager of university policy. He discovered that school trustees were often more concerned with moral questions than with "technical problems of education" and that many held "conflicting viewpoints" regarding the future of BYU (Wilkinson diary, 18 Dec. 1953, 21 May 1959). Thus in early 1955 he resolved to "take fewer things to the Board of Trustees, use my best judgment in making many decisions myself, knowing that . . . unless I make some serious mistake, the entire board would generally support me in my decision" (ibid., 4 Mar. 1955). Furthermore, he strategically cultivated a "special relationship" with David O. McKay, giving him privileged access to the church president. "If Wilkinson wanted something and was turned down by the board," explained BYU treasurer Keifer Sauls, "he'd . . . go around the board and go straight to David O. McKay" (Sauls, Oral History, 1979, 20-22, BYU archives). At the same time, in terms of his political, social, and economic agenda, Wilkinson had the virtually unqualified support of his board of trustees; the divisive factors that would later alienate him from two or three of them centered largely on differences in personality.

33. Wilkinson diary, 18 Mar. 1954. When asked two years earlier if he was interested in running for Utah governor, Wilkinson had replied, "I do not have any political ambitions. Some years ago, I did have, but I saw so much of political life in Washington, that I lost the appetite. I am frank to say to you that I think I can render much more effective service at

"When I accepted this appointment here I did so with the intention of putting all political ambitions behind me. I am still of the same opinion."³⁴ Still, for a strong-willed, stubborn, impatient man, accustomed to expressing his opinions freely and vigorously, Wilkinson found the restraints imposed on him—however narrowly he constructed them—confining. He noted to J. Reuben Clark that "I was quite restless under my instructions that I was not to speak out on political and economic matters." Clark, the eighty-three-year-old statesman and pragmatic churchman, thought of his own political and ecclesiastical career, and of his shattering demotion from first to second counselor in the First Presidency following McKay's ascension as president.³⁵ He advised Wilkinson "to restrain myself and repeated to me again his famous story of Solomon and the wise man, in which the wise man continually said, 'These things will pass.'"³⁶

Wilkinson's discomfort stemmed from his anxiety that a burgeoning federal bureaucracy together with congressional and judicial reinterpretations of the Constitution were fast paving the way to socialism and ultimately Communism. His earlier exodus during the 1930s from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal democracy, "when it became socialistic," to Republican politics had, he believed, enabled him to "see things in better perspective and more independently."³⁷ Illustrative of his Cold War fears is a 2 March 1955 letter to Ezra Taft Benson, at the time U.S. secretary of agriculture. A member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the LDS church and Wilkinson's former Washington, D.C., Mormon stake president (under whom Wilkinson had served as second counselor), Benson was a sympathetic friend and confidant who, Wilkinson knew, shared his political and economic beliefs—and may have actually helped shape them. Enumerating a lengthy list of executive and congressional actions he viewed as symptomatic of socialistic trends, Wilkinson took particular umbrage with "increases in pay and other military allowances"; multi-billion-dollar expenditures for an inter-state highway system; increasing the minimum wage from seventy-five cents to ninety cents per hour, which he termed "certainly a Socialistic New Deal measure"; the decision to provide 70,000 public housing units; "the drift toward further bureaucratic, centralized government" in the call for a federal director of public works; and the move to raise congressional salaries in which President Dwight D. Eisenhower

the Brigham Young University than I could by being Governor" (Wilkinson to Sterling W. Sill, 28 July 1952, Wilkinson Papers).

34. Wilkinson to M. DeMar Teuscher, 25 May 1955, Wilkinson Papers. Teuscher was political writer for the Salt Lake City *Deseret News*.

35. See Quinn, 121-25.

36. Wilkinson diary, 23 Feb. 1955.

37. *Ibid.*, 20 July 1954.

had, Wilkinson wrote, "accepted completely the New Deal theory that men are no longer to be principally motivated by high ideals, by patriotism, or by love of service, but primarily by the almighty dollar."³⁸

Wilkinson reserved his most vehement criticism, however, for the social security system. "No responsible authority," he insisted, "has ever yet attempted to justify the extension of social security unless a more sound fiscal system for its payment is also provided. . . . The greatest tragedy in the history of the United States," he maintained, "is the fact that the Supreme Court was packed, and thereby the constitution was changed so as to permit the expenditure of one person's money in the interests of another. Except for that change in the constitution," he added, "we would not be having the socialism we are having today because Congress would not be permitted to legislate for one class of people at the expense of another." He admitted, in conclusion, "I recognize that the President is trying to arrest some of the more marked trends of the previous administration, but I do not think that he is standing up against the forces of reaction (falsely called liberalism) the way that he should."³⁹ Though also suspicious of the United Nations, Wilkinson chose not to broach the subject.⁴⁰

In response, Benson displayed a moderation that for Wilkinson only served to underscore his own firebrand extremism. "After re-reading your letter I can only characterize it as one of extreme conservatism," Benson mildly castigated his former counselor two months later. "Apparently you . . . disapprove of President Eisenhower's middle-of-the-road program. I am inclined to the so-called conservative side myself but a rigid adherence to extreme conservatism does, in my judgement, have in it a real danger for the present, at least." Convinced that "any presidential candidate who today would run on a platform like the one you outline would face overwhelming defeat," Benson believed that if Wilkinson could escape "from the secluded and relatively quiet office of a University President" and "work in the Government in Washington for a few months you might find yourself closer to agreement with administration policies." Though the secretary confessed to harboring "some misgivings" regarding the interstate highway expansion program and the minimum wage increase, he generally supported those measures Wilkinson opposed. He favored, for example, congressional salary increases and the appointment of a director of public works. "If we do not pay reasonable salaries," he explained, "do we not run the risk of inviting graft by those holding office; or in the main

38. Wilkinson to Benson, 2 Mar. 1955, Wilkinson Papers.

39. *Ibid.*

40. See Wilkinson diary, 16 Oct. 1955.

getting incompetent people? . . . I'm inclined to feel we tend to get about what we pay for in the matter of public service."⁴¹

Of social security, Secretary Benson observed, "You seem to be opposed to the whole Social Security Program. . . . It seems to me there is a basic necessity in modern society to provide a minimum reserve to cover the necessities of life for older citizens who are no longer able to work. Furthermore, it seems to be the only effective way of combating old age pensions offered on an attractive and dangerous basis for political purposes by many States." Acknowledging the "great danger of over taxation and of too much Government," Benson nevertheless affirmed: "tomorrow's generations will not tolerate the extreme disparity of income which normally characterizes a society when Governments take only a minor role in economic life . . . In a Government such as ours there must be an endeavor to improve the lot of the average man if it is to remain in power." Benson was confident that his administration's "constructive program" would eschew "various socialistic schemes," and concluded with a gentle reminder and warning: "We must keep in mind that the principles of Constitutional Government permit change in Government structure with changing times within the framework, of course, of the Constitution. I'm sure you are not against progress, although one not acquainted with you might feel from your letter that you are against change rather than for Constitutional Government."⁴² Although Benson's views would come to reflect Wilkinson's conservatism almost identically,⁴³ the apostle's unenthusiastic response must have been disappointing.

Wilkinson continued to chafe under the injunction that he refrain from public political entanglements and began to direct his increasing fears toward BYU and its faculty. In early January 1956, he recorded that he had

finally got[ten] around to facing one of the real problems on the campus (although in not as aggravated a form as on other campuses)—that of false economic and political thinking. I do not mean by this the question of

41. Benson to Wilkinson, 12 May 1955, David O. McKay Papers.

42. *Ibid.*

43. See, for instance, his views on social security in his 1969 bestseller, *An Enemy Hath Done This* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Publishers): "Social Security is unconstitutional. Why not end it by refunding to all participants their equitable share? The Social Security system in the U.S. is compulsory, unfair and immoral . . ." (226). In fact, Benson's only criticism of Wilkinson following Wilkinson's retirement from BYU in 1971 was that he "could have given more attention to the Social Sciences, and to the philosophy of the men who were hired as leaders in those Departments" ("Summary of Glenn V. Bird Oral Interview of Ezra Taft Benson," 19 July 1977, privately circulated). For Benson's later conservatism, see D. Michael Quinn, "Ezra Taft Benson and Mormon Political Conflicts," in this issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

whether faculty members belong to one political party as opposed to the other but the false thinking that the government exists to support them rather than they to support the government. Had a conference with [two colleagues], who think very strongly on this matter, and together we decided there were five approaches that had to be taken to the problem:

1. An examination of textbooks in the social sciences.
2. Distribution of educational literature to the teachers.
3. The holding of economic and political forums for proper education of teachers.
4. A questionnaire to be used by me in the interrogation of new teachers, and
5. The publication of an economic booklet by the BYU along the lines of one published by George Benson, President of Harding College.⁴⁴

If Wilkinson intended to follow through on his resolve to review and upgrade his school's curricula, his commitment was short-lived. Beginning in late 1955 and continuing into the early months of 1956, the university president faced his first real political temptation since moving to Provo five years earlier: the race for Utah's governorship.

A grassroots campaign, of which Salt Lake City mayor Adiel Stewart was one of the most vocal proponents, had been repeatedly calling for Wilkinson's candidacy, and some local power brokers believed the president stood a genuine chance of being elected. Wilkinson was first approached on 2 February 1956 by Richard Cardall, executive secretary to Utah's Republican senator Arthur V. Watkins, and by Merrill Davis of the Utah State senate about running for governor. Flattered, Wilkinson nonetheless was reluctant to run for office without some kind of guarantee that he could return to BYU if his bid were unsuccessful, explaining to the two men that "I had a real challenge to accept at the B.Y.U.; that the Board of Trustees had been extremely loyal and supportive of my program, and under no circumstances could I run out of my present job without at least their full consent."⁴⁵

Joined early the next month by O. M. Malmquist, political analyst for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and the *Tribune's* publisher, John Fitzpatrick, Cardall called on Wilkinson at the Hotel Utah in downtown Salt Lake City to discuss Wilkinson's political options. Cardall handed the university president a "list of prominent people in the State who had pledged their support" and told him that he had firm commitments from Republican party machinery members in five Wasatch front counties. Having received no word yet from LDS headquarters as to his eligibility, or as to the likelihood of his

44. Wilkinson diary, 2 Jan. 1956.

45. Wilkinson, memo, 10 Apr. 1956, Wilkinson Papers.

being able to return to his university post, Wilkinson replied that "I still would not consent to run." Malmquist assured him that initial support in Salt Lake County for Wilkinson's nomination "had been persistent." Betraying his true feelings, Wilkinson disingenuously reiterated that "I had never had any ambition to be Governor." Malmquist, sensitive to Wilkinson's nuance, answered that if Wilkinson "were going into politics . . . [he] ought to run for the Senate." Torn, Wilkinson "told him my attitude would probably remain the same and that I would not run but that I would let him know when the final decision was made."⁴⁶

Fitzpatrick, one of the city's most influential non-Mormons, "reminded me," Wilkinson recorded, "that he had suggested on a number of previous occasions that I should run for the Senate. He said he hoped I would not get in the Governor's race, although if I would he would support me." Fitzpatrick added that "it would be foolish for me to issue a public statement saying I was not interested—that the free publicity I was getting without any effort by myself was not hurting me." Even if he elected not to run, Fitzpatrick advised, Wilkinson should "not issue any public statement for awhile because if I were still being considered I would then be in a position to help select the man I wanted for governor."⁴⁷

From this meeting Wilkinson called next on David O. McKay. He informed the white-haired church president that "Republican Party leaders in the State felt that Governor [J. Bracken] Lee could not be re-elected even if he should be renominated, because all of the school teachers in the state, all the labor leaders, and many other groups would be solidly against him." McKay, himself a Republican and astute behind-the-scenes observer of Utah politics, evinced little surprise. When Wilkinson reminded him of Lee's earlier campaign pledge "that no man should occupy [the governorship] for more than two terms which would mean that the Governor would have to 'eat his own words,'" McKay replied that he could guess the reason for Wilkinson's interest in the upcoming election and "expressed deep opposition" to his party's other probable candidate, Utah state senator Rendell N. Mabey.⁴⁸

Among Democrats, Wilkinson reported that John S. Boyden and L. C. ("Rennie") Romney appeared to be the two favorites, but "many thought

46. Wilkinson diary, 5 Mar. 1956. Wilkinson was also concerned about the reaction of his wife, Alice. "Your mother is definitely opposed to my running for Governor," he wrote to one of his sons. "She knows the vicissitudes of politics and the fact that anyone in political life is always the subject of unending criticism. I feel quite sure that in this respect I could not fare any better than anyone else" (Wilkinson to David L. Wilkinson, 8 Mar. 1956, Wilkinson Papers).

47. Wilkinson diary, 5 Mar. 1956.

48. *Ibid.*

that Romney would be the nominee." McKay reportedly voiced "very vigorous . . . opposition to Romney on the ground that he was not at all honest."⁴⁹ Wilkinson then explained that "I had never had any personal ambition to be the Governor but that the Republican Party was looking desperately for some candidate who would have an opportunity to be elected and that I would be willing to do whatever President McKay wanted." McKay's immediate response was that Wilkinson should remain president of BYU and administrator of the church's school system. Like Fitzpatrick, though, McKay also suggested that Wilkinson "not make any public statement declining at the present time and that we let events take their course until after the [church's] April [semi-annual General] Conference and then make a final decision." McKay liked the idea of loyal Mormons in visible positions of social, economic, and political power but disliked the bitter controversy that sometimes accompanied such jockeying. Returning to Provo, Wilkinson later telephoned Apostle Harold B. Lee who thought Wilkinson's "present position was much more important than Governor." Lee, himself a former elected public official,⁵⁰ hoped Wilkinson "would have enough sense not to run."⁵¹

While debating the ramifications of a bid for the Utah governorship, Wilkinson attended a campus meeting sponsored by BYU's Young Republicans at which Reed Benson, a Republican activist and eldest son of Ezra Taft Benson, was the featured speaker. Wilkinson reported that he was "greatly disappointed" with twenty-eight-year-old Benson, who "spent most of his time praising his father, vilifying the Democratic Party, and otherwise trying to amuse the crowd. Unfortunately, also, he spent a good deal of time boasting about the fact that he was doing more speaking for the Republican National Committee now than anyone else. This consummate conceit, if not checked, will in the long run completely destroy his usefulness."⁵²

49. According to J. Bracken Lee, McKay "had no use for Rennie [L. C.] Romney—he hated Romney with a passion" (in Dennis L. Lythgoe, *Let 'Em Holler: A Political Biography of J. Bracken Lee* [Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1982], 155).

50. See L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet & Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 106-15.

51. Wilkinson diary, 6 Mar. 1956. Wilkinson was not the first BYU official to involve ecclesiastical superiors in his political aspirations. Franklin S. Harris, BYU president during the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s, reported in his diary in mid-1938, "In the afternoon the First Presidency told me they would like me to make the senate race" (9 Aug. 1930, see also 2, 10 Aug., 12, 13, 14 Sept., and 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, Nov. 1938, Archives and Manuscripts, Lee Library). Harris subsequently lost by more than 20,000 votes to Democrat Elbert D. Thomas.

52. Wilkinson diary, 4 Apr. 1956. Though sympathetic to Benson's politics, Wilkinson condemned his having postponed his legal studies "to do this political speaking. . . . For the building of character in him it would be much better for him in his impressionable years

Within the week following April's LDS general conference Wilkinson met as promised with McKay to remind him of his suggestion that Wilkinson not discourage newspaper speculation on his running for governor. McKay now reported that "his own feeling was that they wanted me very much to stay at the B.Y.U." Wilkinson immediately quizzed McKay as to the views of apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee who, Wilkinson wondered, may have been waning in their support of his educational agenda. "Do you mean by that," McKay asked, "that they do not want you to stay?" "I mean nothing of the kind," Wilkinson answered. "I have had no indication to that effect, but I want to make sure." McKay then said he would discuss the matter with his brethren later that morning.⁵³

When Wilkinson returned to McKay's office shortly before 3:00 p.m., the president "informed me by unanimous vote of the Quorum [of Twelve Apostles] and The First Presidency it was hoped I would stay at the Brigham Young University and not get into politics this year." McKay emphasized that the resolution was unanimous, "that everyone had the same idea." He continued, however, that it was his feeling Wilkinson might later succeed Arthur V. Watkins as Utah's senator. "He felt that was where I could do the most good," Wilkinson recorded, elated that his own political ambitions were shared by his prophet. "I told them I would be happy to abide by their judgment."⁵⁴

Six days later, on 18 April, Wilkinson announced to the press that he would not campaign for governor. When he informed McKay of his public statement the same day, McKay confessed that he had earlier been approached by the church's presiding bishop, Joseph L. Wirthlin, and been urged to allow Wilkinson to run for office. McKay told Wirthlin he had already advised Wilkinson to the contrary. Wilkinson asked McKay if he had any objection to his serving as a delegate to the national Republican convention in San Francisco. McKay replied that "not only was there no objection but he thought I should be a delegate and that he thought I should do everything possible from now on looking toward running for the Senate at the next opportunity. This," Wilkinson happily reported, "came entirely unsolicited from him." McKay quickly added that "there were a lot of things

to be digging at the law." Instead, Wilkinson feared, "he will be acquiring other interests and will never settle down to being a first-class student in the law, which will mean that he will probably become a political lawyer, which in the eyes of the profession is not a lawyer at all" (*ibid.*).

53. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with David O. McKay regarding the governorship, 23 Apr. 1956, Wilkinson Papers; see also Wilkinson to McKay, 13 Apr. 1956, McKay Papers. Wilkinson met with McKay on 12 April.

54. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with David O. McKay regarding the governorship, 23 Apr. 1956.

for me to do at the B.Y.U. before that time should come." Wilkinson agreed.⁵⁵

Throughout the following months, Wilkinson continued to contemplate his political future, though, he would explain, "I have never permitted this interest to interfere with all the time that I have available for doing my work as President and Administrator of the Unified Church School System."⁵⁶ At the Utah Republican convention later that month he lamented that "the atmosphere and the facts which motivate action in a political convention are not nearly as healthy as those which motivate action in a church school system. . . . I am sure," he added, "that if I ever go into politics there will be many things about it that will be distasteful to me. One of the distasteful matters in yesterday's convention was that every one nominated had to give a speech in his own behalf."⁵⁷

When pressured less than five months later by LDS authorities LeGrand Richards, Joseph L. Wirthlin, and Thorpe B. Isaacson "to make a public statement in favor" of Utah's controversial incumbent governor, and a non-Mormon, J. Bracken Lee, Wilkinson again found himself with mixed loyalties. Although Lee had lost to George D. Clyde in the Republican primary by some 8,000 votes, he was contemplating an independent bid for the governorship.⁵⁸ Aware of Lee's "integrity, his independence of political tricks, and the fact that there had been no attack of any kind on his administration as Governor, but rather on political issues which were clearly national and therefore irrelevant," Wilkinson "desired very much" to tender his endorsement of the political maverick. But also aware of the delicate position he held both as BYU president and future senatorial hopeful, and possibly fearing repercussions from equally partisan church and Republican party leaders, Wilkinson wrote that he "felt that my usefulness might be somewhat impaired if I did so and I therefore forsook my personal desires in the interest of my position despite the pressure of some of the Brethren [Richards, Wirthlin, and Isaacson] and despite the fact that they even went to President McKay and obtained his consent for me to make a statement. My conscience kind of troubles me," he later confessed, "because it has never been in character for me to refuse to express myself on troubled issues. I hope, however, I made the right decision."⁵⁹

55. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with David O. McKay, 18 Apr. 1956, Wilkinson Papers; see also Wilkinson Diary, 18 Apr. 1956.

56. Wilkinson diary, 2 July 1958.

57. *Ibid.*, 27 Apr. 1956.

58. For Lee's third-term bid for Utah's governorship, see Lythgoe, 203-23.

59. Wilkinson diary, 10 Sept. 1956. In the November election, George D. Clyde won the governor's race, with 127,297 votes; Democrat L. C. Romney came in second, with 111,297 votes; and J. Bracken Lee, who announced his independent candidacy in October,

The following January, Wilkinson, convalescing from a massive heart attack and surgery, discovered a growing movement among Republicans to submit his name in consideration for appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court to fill the vacancy left by the resignation of Justice Stanley F. Read. In February, Utah's Republican senator Watkins publicly declared his intention to present Wilkinson's name to President Eisenhower. Wilkinson, aware of the improbability that a man in his present fragile physical condition would receive serious attention, asked that Watkins not present his name at that time. "It does not seem to me timely," he explained to the press, "that I should have my friends recommend me for this appointment."⁶⁰

The next year, his health significantly improved, Wilkinson found himself, much to his own satisfaction, the focus of fervent appeals that he challenge Watkins for the Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate. Meeting with McKay in early 1958, Wilkinson discovered that his senatorial aspirations were greeted less than enthusiastically. The previous day, McKay had given his permission to leading Utah Republican leaders to "go ahead and try to get Dr. Ernest L. Wilkinson appointed to the [U.S.] Supreme Court at the first vacancy that might occur."⁶¹ Wilkinson tersely informed McKay that he would willingly abide by any decision made by church officials provided "they get the full facts"—which he clearly hoped would change their minds. He admitted that he "sometimes believe [I] could render more service elsewhere because of my legal background, . . . [but] recognize, however, it is more important to further the work of the Lord than of Caesar." Still, he added, "we believe our government was inspired of the Lord"—thus adding a religious aspect to the discussion.⁶²

Addressing the likelihood of a Supreme Court appointment, Wilkinson admitted that his chances were remote. He was approaching the age limit for federal appointees; he had never held a judicial position; and he expressed skepticism that Watkins was as supportive as had been reported (Wilkinson probably thought Watkins had heard of his possible challenge). Unaffected by Wilkinson's pessimism, McKay "informed me that he would like very, very much in the interest of the Church to see me appointed to the United States Supreme Court[,] . . . suggest[ing] that he would be most

took third, with 94,428 votes. Lee had previously enjoyed the support of the LDS church. However, during his second term as governor he had alienated some ranking Mormons by his criticism of President Eisenhower's administration which they interpreted as an indirect criticism of Ezra Taft Benson.

60. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 17 Feb. 1957.

61. McKay diary, 3 Jan. 1958.

62. Wilkinson, confidential memorandum with David O. McKay, 4 Jan. 1958, Wilkinson Papers.

happy to do what he could to have me appointed to the Court." The church president announced that he was "very much concerned over the Court; that he considered Chief Justice [Earl] Warren a Socialist and that I was needed to balance Warren on the Court." While not eager to have Wilkinson leave his post with the church's school system, McKay added nonetheless, "An appointment of this kind would do great honor and credit to the Church." Wilkinson pointed out that "there was little I could do myself in favor of such an appointment." McKay replied that he realized there were obstacles "but thought we should (my friends) take such action as possible to get Senator Watkins enthused about me."⁶³

Concerned about his president's apparent change of heart, Wilkinson reminded McKay that two years earlier he had suggested that Wilkinson consider running for the Senate and that now "that might be the desirable thing to do." He indicated that with J. Bracken Lee's loss in 1956 as a third-party independent to Utah's current governor by only 26,000 votes, "there was serious doubt as to whether Watkins would be able to be reelected to the Senate" should Lee choose to run against him. "Many [are] therefore urging me to run," he told McKay, "on the theory I could avert a split in the party—that the Lee followers had nothing against me and would probably support me, and many of Watkins followers would prefer me to a Democrat." He admitted, however, that "I had made no decision and that I would not want to run without a leave of absence from the Church School System."

McKay, who had not given up on the prospect of a Mormon sitting on the Supreme Court, "repeated that as far as the United States Supreme Court is concerned, he would very much like to have me on that Court." As to the U.S. Senate, the Mormon president "thought things ought to take their course," much as he had suggested two years ago.⁶⁴ McKay did agree, however, that if Wilkinson succeeded in garnering the Republican nomination "we shall give you a leave of absence from your present position while you run, and let you have your freedom to do as you wish, and will not lose your position as President of the Brigham Young University."⁶⁵

Five weeks later, mulling over the political decisions with which he was struggling, Wilkinson attended a Republican Day Banquet at which Ezra Taft Benson was the guest speaker. Finding Benson's speech "on the whole" to be fine, Wilkinson applauded the secretary's stand against "subsidies and Government controls and handouts, . . . but how his conscience permitted him to say at the same time," Wilkinson wondered, "that he wanted it definitely understood that he was not in favor of doing away with

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. McKay diary, 4 Jan. 1958.

the price support program, . . . and how, consistent with his philosophy, he could have advocated the soil bank program, which is a complete Federal handout and subsidy, only the Good Lord and a politician could understand." Wilkinson lamented: "If one has to be duplicitous in that way to be in politics, it may be good that I am not in it." Yet in fairness, he conceded, "may I record that in these days of political legalized thievery, maybe things could be worse if someone other than Benson were Secretary of Agriculture."⁶⁶

By the end of March 1958, Wilkinson was becoming increasingly doubtful that an all-out foray into partisan politics would prove successful. He informed McKay that while "in all probability I would not run for the Senate," the question had not been entirely resolved. Still hoping for a judicial appointment, McKay answered that "he would very, very much prefer that I concentrate on my going to the Supreme Court but on the other hand he would like very much for me to be in the Senate."⁶⁷ Nine days later, McKay's unwillingness to endorse Wilkinson's participation in the Senate race had completely solidified. Telephoning Wilkinson, the president remarked, "You are in such a responsible position now, and we have our school—the greatest in the country. I feel that for you to get out and try [for the Republican nomination] and especially if you do not get it, it would lessen your dignity. I should rather," McKay announced, "you would not run this year." Also, he admitted, many General Authorities were opposed to granting Wilkinson a leave of absence, sensing that the conclusion would be drawn that the church was supporting Wilkinson over Watkins. They strongly pushed instead for a release or resignation should Wilkinson elect to run. Fearing that the church school system could permanently lose an effective administrator, McKay saw no other alternative but to ask that Wilkinson refrain for the time.⁶⁸

Additional discouraging advice came from church leaders Hugh B. Brown and J. Reuben Clark. Brown, whose 1934 defeat in the Democratic primary for U.S. senator had been "crushing,"⁶⁹ told Wilkinson that "he got ten times more enjoyment out of his Church work [than politics]." Like McKay, Brown "strongly urged that I stay in my present assignment where I had most unusual opportunities and that I not try to run for the Senate." Clark, also an unsuccessful candidate for U.S. senator in 1922,⁷⁰ confided

66. Wilkinson diary, 12 Feb. 1958.

67. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with David O. McKay, 31 Mar. 1958, Wilkinson Papers.

68. McKay diary, transcript of a telephone conversation, 9 Apr. 1958.

69. Eugene E. Campbell and Richard D. Poll, *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 109.

70. See Frank W. Fox, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young

that he "many, many times thanked the Lord for his not having been elected. Had he gone ahead and been elected he would have had to compromise on his convictions and would have become a 'common scold' and that he would not have been able to accomplish anything affirmative and would have been very much frustrated." Clark promised Wilkinson that because of his beliefs he would find the Senate a difficult experience. Clark further reminded him that "the Church had invested millions of dollars in the Brigham Young University and that I had commitments to invest many other millions and that in view of this situation I could not run out on the Church." Wilkinson replied that he "had been disappointed in one aspect over my present job—that I sometimes, in accordance with decision, would cross certain bridges and then have the bridges torn out by the brethren through changing their minds and that I had been left stranded. I told him that I expected such things in politics but I didn't expect it in Church Administration." Clark agreed that the Lord worked with imperfect hands. Wilkinson was so disheartened after talking with Clark that he told his wife "it looked like I was not really my own agent to make this decision but that both on my own and on the advice given to me, I would not make the race."⁷¹

Two days after asking for McKay's opinion, Wilkinson reluctantly confirmed that he would not attempt the Senate bid, that he had again come to the conclusion that he could be of greater service in Provo than in Washington, D.C.—as well as perhaps that the likelihood of success was not yet sufficiently great to justify the risk. In response, McKay continued to press Wilkinson to consider the Supreme Court. "I have said to my associates that I should like to have you on [the] Supreme Court," McKay stressed.⁷² The president's pleas likely fell on deaf ears, however, as Wilkinson not only recognized that the Senate race offered him the only real possibility for the political career and immediate impact on national policy he wanted but that the probability of a seat on the Supreme Court was virtually nonexistent. Disappointed, Wilkinson rationalized less than three months later that while "I think I am better trained for politics and have more interest in it day by day than the monotonous and routine matters of education, . . . eventually the Mormon Church will mean more to the world than the American Congress or the American Government, and . . . I feel I can probably do more good in developing a great educational system for that Church than by going to Washington."⁷³

University Press, 1980), 415-19.

71. Wilkinson diary, 10 Apr. 1958.

72. McKay diary, transcript of a telephone conversation, 11 Apr. 1958.

73. Wilkinson diary, 2 July 1958. Watkins did edge out Lee in the Republican primaries, but Lee subsequently decided to run as an independent, seriously dividing the state's

Throughout the following several years Wilkinson remained almost totally devoted to BYU and the Unified Church School System, keeping overt partisan political activities to a minimum. Though thoroughly conservative, he retained an ability to examine issues he could not countenance, expressing reluctant admiration for aspects he considered positive.⁷⁴ In early 1960, he could not help venting his frustration at what he believed was the irrational Cold War suspicion of Soviet Russia harbored by some BYU trustees. Previously the board had "permitted us to work out an arrangement with the University of Moscow whereby Russian students come to the BYU and BYU students go to Russia." Wilkinson believed that the exposure to western capitalism would help convert the Russians to free-market economics. Now, however, the board refused to allow the university to participate in a national travel program in which a group of BYU students (one of seven such groups) would travel to Russia, evidently fearing that the BYU students might succumb to the lures of socialism.

J. Reuben Clark, presiding at a trustees' meeting in the absence of David O. McKay, "led out in a discussion against these programs." No doubt reflecting on his own misplaced support of Nazism, Clark pointedly asked Wilkinson if he would permit one of his sons to visit Russia on such a program. Wilkinson felt that the trip would merely reinforce the virtues of America and replied vigorously that he had a son who had recently returned from a mission to Germany and that "I assuredly would permit him to go, and not only that but I would encourage him to go." Clark countered that he would not want one of his children to travel to Russia. "In the case of my son," Wilkinson returned, "I would have complete confidence in his moral integrity." Clark won out, however, and the board ruled not to sanction the travel program. Wilkinson later wrote that in view of the board's two conflicting resolutions, "I must, therefore, take up the two inconsistent actions at some future time and have them resolved."⁷⁵

However tolerant of cultural differences, Wilkinson was nonetheless unequivocally opposed to even the most subtle hint of socialism and Communism. In the face of increasing affronts to the stability of constitutional government and capitalist economics, which he believed were in-

Republican majority. Consequently, the Democratic candidate, Frank E. Moss, carried the election in November.

74. After a meeting sponsored by the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce with a group of Soviet provincial governors in mid-February 1960, Wilkinson remarked, "Since in Russia there are no private businesses, every one of these individuals is, of course, interested in economic production of the state and they are all quite well versed in what is going on in their particular parts of Russia and in Russia as a whole. These political leaders in Russia have one great advantage over our political leaders because all production is done by the state" (*ibid.*, 13 Feb. 1960).

75. *Ibid.*, 2 Mar. 1960; cf. BYU Board of Trustees Meeting, minutes, 2 Mar. 1960.

separable and divinely inspired, his opposition grew more intense. Responding to his own fears, together with new responsibilities occasioned by the growth of the church's educational system, Wilkinson approached McKay in early 1960 with a plea that the prophet bestow upon him a special blessing of comfort and strength. Acceding to the touching request, McKay placed his hands on the head of the sixty-year-old church administrator and solemnly told him that he "had responsibilities greater than any person had borne in the educational program of the Church; greater than those borne by [the school's founding president] Karl G. Maeser or any of his successors." Referring repeatedly to Wilkinson as "beloved associate" and "esteemed friend," McKay prayed that Wilkinson "might have vision for the future of the Church School system and the ability to transform such vision into action." Thanking the Lord for Wilkinson's personal sacrifices and devotion, McKay pleaded that Wilkinson "might have vision to understand more than anyone else in educational circles the dangers of Communism and that [he] might be a leader in our schools in protecting our people against this ungodlike philosophy." McKay asked that Wilkinson "be given the vision to protect our philosophy of 'capitalism,' [and that] the threat of war with the Communist foe might be stayed." He closed with the promise that "my body would be cleansed of any impurities or health destroying elements 'for my age,' and that I would have strength to do my work."⁷⁶

For the religiously simple and generally orthodox Wilkinson, McKay's blessing represented something far more important than wise counsel and friendly admonition. Not only the literal word of God to the university president personally, McKay's blessing also witnessed to Wilkinson that his own political views as well as attempts to promote them on- and off-campus were favored of his heavenly father. McKay's injunction against Communism was, for Wilkinson, divine confirmation and commandment.

Several months later, in the middle of the heated 1960 U.S. presidential campaign, Wilkinson confessed to McKay that "I was very much concerned about the financial solvency of our country," adding that "if something miraculous didn't happen, we would fast end up as a socialist country." McKay surprised him by quickly replying, "We already are." Wilkinson later commented, "It was apparent that he was deeply concerned."⁷⁷ Shortly afterwards, fearful of the many "socialist proposals" Democratic hopeful John F. Kennedy had endorsed, Wilkinson predictably sided with U.S. vice-president Richard M. Nixon in his unsuccessful Republican bid for the White House.⁷⁸

76. Wilkinson diary, 28 Apr. 1960.

77. *Ibid.*, 8 Aug. 1960.

78. *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1960.

Wilkinson's fears for the future of the United States during this period continued to mount. In October 1960 he and the president of Provo City's chamber of commerce co-sponsored a one-day Freedom Forum "to re-emphasize the important values of our American way of life." "Inasmuch as our God-given, traditional freedoms are being threatened at this point in history more than ever before," their open letter read, "it seems an appropriate time to become more keenly aware of the dangers that beset us. . . . The American people can meet the severe challenges before them only through a complete awareness of the powerful attacks now being levied against our basic liberties by Communists and others."⁷⁹ Wilkinson also bemoaned the continuing appearance of nationally-syndicated columnist Drew Pearson in the pages of the *Deseret News*, where Wilkinson served on the board of directors, and lobbied repeatedly that Pearson be replaced by conservative commentator and Arizona senator Barry Goldwater,⁸⁰ arguing that Goldwater's articles "represented [the] Mormon viewpoint."⁸¹ Wilkinson presented his economic and political views across the country to receptive audiences and at home recommended against renewing the teaching contracts of faculty members who espoused beliefs he felt were too sympathetic to Communism and socialism.⁸² Despite this, he also had to answer criticisms of alumni and friends that his school was becoming too soft on Communism.⁸³

79. Wilkinson and Perlman, open letter, 10 Oct. 1960, Wilkinson Papers. Wilkinson and Ezra Taft Benson later toyed with the idea of establishing an institute or department of freedom at BYU to "bring together our departments of Economics, History and Political Science" where "the basic concepts from the Mormon point of view [could be taught] giving proper recognition to the founding fathers" (Benson to Harold B. Lee, 13 Aug. 1962; see also Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with President David O. McKay, 7 Mar. 1962; Benson to Wilkinson, 3 Apr. 1962; Wilkinson to Benson, 6 Apr. 1962; Benson to Wilkinson, 18 June 1963, all in Wilkinson Papers).

80. See Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference held with President David O. McKay, 23 Aug. 1961; Wilkinson, memorandum of a telephone conference with President David O. McKay, 9 Jan. 1962; and Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with President David O. McKay, 19 Jan. 1962, all in Wilkinson Papers.

81. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with President David O. McKay, 7 Mar. 1962, Wilkinson Papers.

82. Wilkinson's popular talks included "Will America Remain a Free Land?," "America, The Land of Promise," "Our Patriotic Duty," "The History of Greek Independence and Its Meaning to Americans," "Washington and Lincoln—What Would They Tell Us Today?," "A New American Greatness," "One-Party State," "Will America Remain a Free Land?" and especially "The Founding, Fruition, and Future of Free Enterprise," which he delivered on more than twenty-one separate occasions from 1961 to 1963. On Wilkinson's relations with his BYU faculty, see, for example, Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with President David O. McKay, 7 Mar. 1962, Wilkinson Papers; and John T. Bernhard to Fred Jackman, 31 Jan. 1961, Bernhard Papers, BYU archives.

83. See, for example, R. S. Unice to Ezra Taft Benson, 26 Apr. 1962, Wilkinson Papers;

By late 1961 Wilkinson found himself again entertaining a future senatorial race. Facing his sixty-fifth birthday in three years, he asked McKay if the board of trustees intended to enforce its retirement policy with respect to him "so that I could decide whether I should get in some other field at the present time before it was too late."⁸⁴ He later called on J. Reuben Clark who "had heard from others that I was being urged to go into politics." Bed-ridden and suffering from bouts with depression, the first counselor recommended that Wilkinson not "smudge a distinguished career with a defeat in politics." Clark, Wilkinson wrote, "seemed to think that his views and mine were too old fashioned to get anywhere these days in politics and he said he took a dim view in his later life of 'political preferment.'"⁸⁵ At least one of Wilkinson's critics would have agreed with Clark's assessment. "Utah is the most backward and reactionary state in the union," he wrote. "As regards Wilkinson, . . . we have enough throw-backs to feudalism in this country that I am amazed that we are still a republic."⁸⁶

Nevertheless, Wilkinson was fast becoming convinced that he could not put off his political ambitions much longer. When he discovered too late in 1961 that McKay approved his running for Republican national committeeman from Utah, he lamented, "Frankly, I didn't think the First Presidency would have permitted me to run or I might have decided [sooner]."⁸⁷ Less than four weeks later he asked Harold B. Lee if "I ought to run for the Senate now or probably . . . the next time." Lee cautiously answered that Wilkinson "should obtain advice from President McKay."⁸⁸ When Wilkinson broached the question with McKay in early March the next year, the president told him that "if I wanted to run for the Senate in 1964 he would give me a year's leave of absence to make the race." McKay recommended that Wilkinson "begin preparing for it and probably do it." Wilkinson, hedging his bets, "told him very definitely . . . that I had not made any decision in that direction." However, the two men agreed that if Wilkinson "did make such a decision" he would have McKay's support and blessing.⁸⁹

No doubt expecting the best, Wilkinson asked McKay the following

and Wilkinson diary, 2 Aug. 1963.

84. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with David O. McKay, 22 May 1961, Wilkinson Papers.

85. Wilkinson diary, 22 May 1961.

86. J. O. Christensen to Dean R. Brimhall, 8 May 1961, Brimhall Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library.

87. Wilkinson diary, 14 Oct. 1961.

88. *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1961.

89. Wilkinson, memorandum of a conference with President McKay, 7 Mar. 1962, Wilkinson Papers.

month if he objected to Wilkinson's delivering an address at the Republican state convention that August. Concerned at the accusations of the church's involvement in politics that would arise if the president of BYU were to participate in a partisan rally, McKay disappointed Wilkinson by replying that "under the present circumstances I should not do so." McKay pointed out that his second counselor [in the First Presidency, Hugh B. Brown] was very politically minded as a Democrat and that while he, President McKay, personally would like me to do it, he thought it was unwise at the present time." "Having asked him," Wilkinson wrote in his diary, annoyed that McKay had permitted his Democratic counselor to address state Democrats two years earlier, "I have to follow his advice, much to my regret." McKay added, paradoxically, that "he wanted me to make as many national addresses as I could because he wanted me to do something nationally."⁹⁰ Wilkinson pressed McKay again three months later for permission to address the state convention, but McKay remained opposed to the idea, fearing criticism from his counselors.⁹¹

While at Utah's Republican convention that August, Wilkinson reflected on the vagaries of politics and on the political career of one of the newest contenders for congress from Utah's second congressional district. Reed Benson, now thirty-four years old, "is a rather glib speaker and for those who do not know his background, he is quite persuasive," Wilkinson recorded. "Furthermore, he is fundamentally correct on political principles and would be a strength in that respect in the Congress; but he is very immature, rash in his judgment, and has never so far held down a job for any period of time. . . . With this background," Wilkinson continued, "when I asked the next state chairman this morning whether Reed had any chance he wryly replied, 'I think \$22,500 (the salary of a Congressman) is a pretty high price to pay a young kid out of work.' That is the feeling of all who know him. . . . And yet he may make a pretty good race. If he does it would be another example of the gullibility of the public."⁹²

The following October Wilkinson was invited to deliver a televised address in behalf of Utah's incumbent Republican senator, Wallace F. Bennett. A long-time supporter of Bennett, Wilkinson jumped at the opportunity to express his political convictions publicly and evidently managed to secure McKay's acquiescence, although he did not personally approach the president. McKay's hot-tempered Democratic first counselor, Henry D. Moyle, who had recently succeeded J. Reuben Clark, was furious

90. Wilkinson diary, 13 Apr. 1962.

91. *Ibid.*, 28 July 1962.

92. *Ibid.*, 4 Aug. 1962. Benson lost in the primaries, subsequently worked for the John Birch Society in Washington, D.C., and eventually joined the faculty of Brigham Young University.

at Wilkinson's apparent temerity. He scolded Wilkinson on the morning of this talk that the speech "stunk to high heaven," that Wilkinson's "job at the BYU as well as their job in Salt Lake was to save souls and not to destroy them." He angrily told Wilkinson, "[You] ought to keep entirely out of politics," that "it was already suspected that [you are] using the BYU as a stepping stone for political office and that this would confirm it."⁹³

Wilkinson answered that he had McKay's consent. Unimpressed, Moyle countered that the educator "could not blame this on President McKay." Wilkinson reluctantly admitted that he "did not see President McKay about it myself but I had been informed President McKay had consented and I had checked back and found that was correct."⁹⁴

Insisting that he "did not intend to give any political tirade," Wilkinson promised "that the talk I was going to give was a matter of principle and I was not going to defame anyone."

"Regardless of what [you] said," Moyle replied, "it would be construed as the Church speaking. It would be printed in the New York Times and . . . [you] could not disassociate [your]self from the Church and the School. It was the height of folly and not even debatable." Moyle then informed Wilkinson that he and his brothers would no longer be making a sizeable donation to BYU. "This was the only way he had of controlling me," Wilkinson wrote, quoting Moyle, "and we would not get it, that he would give it to other institutions rather than the BYU."⁹⁵

After their heated exchange, Wilkinson called on apostles Delbert L. Stapley and Harold B. Lee. Both men recommended that Wilkinson contact McKay. Wilkinson obediently left a message with McKay's personal secretary.

Telephoning Wilkinson from his home in Huntsville, Utah, later that afternoon, McKay advised Wilkinson, "You go right ahead and give it and if you don't get the \$450,000 from the Moyles we will find some other way to give you the money." Wilkinson said that he "had had a typical Moyle dressing-down." Obviously annoyed at his counselor's handling of Wilkinson, McKay replied, "Some of the rest of us can let the fur fly also. You are a Republican, aren't you?" McKay reportedly continued. "Then go ahead and give it as a Republican."⁹⁶

Wilkinson addressed his television audience that evening as scheduled. Less than one month later, McKay told him that "he was particularly delighted with the political address I had given during the campaign which,

93. Wilkinson, memorandum, 29 Oct. 1962, attached to Wilkinson diary, 29 Oct. 1962.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

of course, was very much to the consternation of his two counselors." According to Wilkinson, McKay quipped that "when it came to politics his two counselors [Democrats Henry D. Moyle and Hugh B. Brown] just couldn't separate fact from fable."⁹⁷

Yet Wilkinson found little solace in McKay's amiable reassurances and continued to debate in his own mind the merits of remaining at BYU or making an attempt for the U.S. Senate. The following year he mentioned his quandary to McKay, who subsequently acknowledged that "he knew I had had some difficulties but that one of the two General Authorities who had given me considerable opposition was now no longer a General Authority." (Moyle had unexpectedly passed away less than two weeks earlier in Florida.) According to Wilkinson, McKay "implied also that he thought I ought not also to be too much concerned about the other one," Harold B. Lee. Wilkinson understood this to mean that McKay would not be appointing Lee as a replacement for Moyle in the First Presidency. (In fact, McKay called Canadian businessman N. Eldon Tanner as his second counselor and elevated Hugh B. Brown to first counselor.) Wilkinson commented that "with respect to President Moyle and Brother Lee that the Lord had intervened in one case and could in another." According to Wilkinson, McKay agreed.⁹⁸

In response to Wilkinson's conundrum, McKay offered his opinion that he "probably could do more good in the school system, . . . [and] wouldn't be able to clear up the mess in Washington any way in 4 or 5 years." Wilkinson admitted that he "knew that." Finally though, and apparently appreciating Wilkinson's true feelings, McKay recommended that he "pray about it more," believing that Wilkinson "could come up with the right answer."⁹⁹

The "right answer," Wilkinson would conclude less than two months later, followed logically from his realization that much of his mission in coming to BYU had been accomplished; that McKay's age and poor health meant that he could not count on the president's continued unflagging support; that resistance was growing to aspects of his educational agenda for the church's school system; that his stubborn personality would likely continue to clash with equally opinionated general authorities, especially an increasingly influential Harold B. Lee; that in his mind the country

97. Wilkinson diary, 27 Nov. 1962. Wilkinson soon afterwards reported that although he had feared his friendship with Moyle had been jeopardized because of the speech, he was relieved to find Moyle "extremely friendly" during a Christmas party (*ibid.*, 20 Dec. 1962).

98. Wilkinson, confidential memorandum, "Re: Conference with President McKay," 30 Sept. 1963, Wilkinson Papers.

99. *Ibid.*

seemed to be steadily drifting away from the ideals of the Founding Fathers; and that his age was becoming a serious liability.

Thus after eight soul-searching weeks Wilkinson decided he had tread political waters long enough.¹⁰⁰ The 1964 race for U.S. senator from Utah promised Utah's largely Republican electorate a well-defined choice between an incumbent liberal Democrat, Frank E. Moss, and a conservative Republican challenger. Filling this latter position was, Wilkinson optimistically believed, his life's destiny. Less than a year later, however, a bitterly disillusioned Ernest Wilkinson would chalk the tumultuous, humiliating experience up as one of the greatest disappointments of his life.¹⁰¹

100. See McKay diary, 20 Nov. 1963; Wilkinson diary, 27 Nov., 4 Dec. 1963.

101. For Wilkinson's 1964 senate campaign, see Gary James Bergera, "'A Sad and Expensive Experience': Ernest L. Wilkinson's 1964 Bid for the U.S. Senate," forthcoming in *Utah Historical Quarterly*.