

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP: J. BRACKEN LEE AND THE MORMON CHURCH

DENNIS L. LYTHGOE

J. BRACKEN LEE, A NON-MORMON in an overwhelmingly Mormon state, became its most colorful and controversial politician with probably a greater impact on his state and the nation than any Utah figure since Brigham Young. As a conservative Republican, his views often coincided with those of church officials. While Mormon governors often felt the need to demonstrate their independence from the Church, Lee as a non-Mormon could court the Church freely. In an enduring career as mayor of Price for 12 years, governor of Utah for 8 years and mayor of Salt Lake City for 12 years, as a perennial candidate for governor and senator, as a frequently mentioned prospect for president and vice-president, and as a forceful spokesman for conservatism, his impact was felt longer and was more effective than that of any other Utah politician.

In a vigorous defense of his fiscal conservatism as governor, Lee once advised, "Do it honestly, do the best you know how, and let 'em holler!"

J. Bracken Lee was born in Price, Utah, on January 7, 1899. His grandfather, Edwin C. Lee, came to Utah as a Mormon convert from England in 1855, and all of Edwin's sons were active in the Church except Arthur, J. Bracken Lee's father.

Lee's maternal ancestors were also Mormon converts who arrived in Utah in 1849. When Lee's great-grandmother rejected her husband's plural marriage, she

was kept in Utah by the personal intervention of Brigham Young (or so Lee claimed). She accordingly raised Lee's grandmother outside the Church. Lee's grandmother told him that her "own father patted her on the head at the age of ten and asked her whose little girl she was." She naturally raised Lee's mother outside the Church.

J. Bracken Lee never joined the Church, although he married a Mormon, Margaret Draper from Wellington, Utah. Their daughter, Jon, whom Lee called a "devout Mormon," tried very hard to convert him. "I told her, 'Now you believe *your* religion but you leave *me* alone!' And she has never talked to me about it since."¹

Lee's philosophy of government made him one of the few genuine mavericks in American political history. From his earliest days in politics, he was charismatic, independent, supremely self-confident and candid.

He was one of the few Utah governors to be nationally known, especially for his fiscal conservatism and his vociferous opposition to income tax, foreign aid and the United Nations. His candor and gift for self-expression are immediately reminiscent of Harry Truman, although because of his opposing political philosophy, Lee would never accept such a comparison. Due to a penchant for invective and personal confrontation, he probably made more enemies than any other Utah politician, and some Utahns grew embarrassed and uncomfortable with his national reputation.

The most prominent example of his tendency to arouse controversy was probably his strenuous opposition to the 16th Amendment. After writing several letters to other governors, he made an appeal for national support at the 1954 governors' conference. Although most of the nation's governors hesitated to support such a radical point of view, other people who read about it voiced strong agreement. A national sensation overnight, Lee received an avalanche of mostly favorable, laudatory mail, suggesting he run for president and declaring that he stood out "like a lighthouse" because of his "valiant efforts in behalf of the American way of life" and because of his concern for problems outside his own statehouse.²

Then in October, 1955, Lee dropped a bombshell. He formally announced his intention to withhold that portion of his federal income tax not already collected or withheld from salary, in order to contest the right of the government to use taxpayers' money for foreign aid.³ He placed the money in a trust account in Walker Bank in Salt Lake City, with instructions that the money be paid only on a court order.

The next day, officials of the Democratic Party in Utah accused him of defying national laws and demanded that he either retract his statement or resign.⁴ Lee responded that he had not assumed the governorship to "please the Democratic State Committee."⁵ Soon his office reported a flood of letters and telegrams from all over the country commending his decision.

By December, his office reported that 1,500 letters had been received with 99 percent favoring his stand; by May 1956 the number had grown to 3,000.⁶ But criticism was manifested in other ways. Vandals decorated the governor's mansion with signs painted in oil-base paints on the front steps: "We pay you, you pay

too," "Pay Up, Brack," and "Grow Up, Gov." Lee reacted calmly, calling it "a very good paint job—well above average."⁷

In the meantime, George Humphrey, secretary of the treasury, warned Lee that if he did not pay by April 16th, the IRS would collect in the "customary and usual manner."⁸ When Lee still refused to pay, the government attached his bank account in the amount of \$1,203.10 without a court order and placed a lien on his possessions.⁹ Although Lee advised bank officials that his consent was not forthcoming, they replied that they had no alternative but to release the funds.¹⁰ The battle was over, and it was an unsettling one to Utahns who had been accustomed to low-profile governors who were never considered for national office. Lee's subsequent failure to win nomination by his party for a third term was undoubtedly based in part on the income tax imbroglio.

As mayor of Salt Lake City, Lee continued his antagonism toward the IRS in speeches around the country and in interviews, but he did not attempt court action again. For its part, the IRS continued to audit Lee's returns, providing him with adequate fuel for his tirades. "Now you tell me that you have freedom when you've got a Gestapo like this? Do you believe in the Bill of Rights? How in the hell can you believe in the income tax?"¹¹ In attacking the IRS, the Lee that his critics pictured as a neanderthal politician was actually ahead of his time and in denouncing income tax in the 1970s, his voice is no longer unique.

While his record as mayor of Price was in some ways laudable, it was also morally questionable to the typically religious Utah voter. But as governor, he gained immediate respectability for his emphasis on integrity and economy. His principal target for economy was education, however, and he soon made an enemy of almost every educator in the state (a fact that would haunt his political career). On balance, his healthy relationship with the Mormon Church probably saved him from the educators' wrath. When, however, toward the end of his second term, his candor turned to the national administration, in the person of the popular Dwight Eisenhower, his political career suffered. With church leaders, educators and politicians of his own party firmly opposed to him, his third-term hopes were dashed. Even as an independent for governor in 1956 and for senator in 1958, he exercised startling influence over Utah politics.

Lee proved his resilience by his three-time election as mayor of Utah's largest city, retaining an uncanny popularity with voters until his retirement in 1972. Finally, as an ex-mayor in his 70s, he demonstrated a continuing ability to influence the election or defeat of other politicians. He remained a respected though controversial figure because he seemed always to retain "the courage of his convictions."

II

While still mayor of Price, Lee was nominated for governor in 1944 to run against Democratic incumbent, Herbert B. Maw. Maw was also a member of the Sunday School General Board and therefore could be expected to draw Mormon support against Lee. But Maw was not a favorite of church authorities. In 1937, as president of the state senate, he had sponsored legislation striking at powerful utilities which were allied with General Authorities of the Church through

directorships. It was common knowledge that Maw's actions were not popular with Mormon leaders.¹² In 1940, church opposition to Maw was clearly delineated when he decided not to reappoint Apostle Stephen L. Richards and David O. McKay of the First Presidency to the governing boards of the University of Utah and Utah State Agricultural College, respectively. Maw believed that church leaders dominated boards and therefore should not serve on them. He said it was clear that both McKay and Richards resented that decision.¹³

Presumably, church opposition to Maw also crystallized on moral grounds, due to his alleged connections as a private lawyer with wholesale liquor firms supplying Utah's state-controlled liquor stores.¹⁴ Maw himself believed that church authorities had no good reason to oppose him, except that many of them were Republicans by conviction, "unless they believed the propaganda" about him. Maw was proud of his church membership and said he was under the impression that many church leaders supported him.¹⁵ Some church leaders, however, were convinced that Maw's church credentials were less than perfect and that his political performance did not qualify him for support. For instance, Ezra Taft Benson, at the time a junior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, declared that the Church supported Lee for governor. He said that they considered him a man of conviction and integrity and preferred him to Maw, "who was known to equivocate on some issues. Generally, the Church prefers a non-Mormon with high principles to a Jack Mormon." He said that "Brack had a deep spirituality," though it did not show on the surface.¹⁶ That Maw never sought church support¹⁷ may partially account for the coolness of church leaders toward him.

The election of 1944 was known for its moral overtones. At Maw's behest in a slow-moving campaign, Gordon Taylor Hyde, a former Mormon bishop, and Joseph J. Cannon, former editor of the *Deseret News*, prepared a seven-page pamphlet, "Morals and the Mayor," which made numerous moral allegations against Lee's administration in Price. After making a personal investigation in Price, Dr. Francis W. Kirkham, a Mormon educator, agreed to allow his name to be used as the sole author. The pamphlet charged Lee with running a "wide open town where gambling houses and houses of prostitution operate on the main street and liquor is readily available even to 13 year old boys."¹⁸

Mayor Lee allegedly hindered state officials from stamping out these conditions. For instance, when state officers tried to stop the illegal sale of liquor in Price, Lee had an ordinance passed prohibiting the search of buildings. "This subterfuge offered the Mayor an opportunity to molest the state's representatives."¹⁹ One such incident concerned the Jones Club, where illegal sales of liquor were reportedly made by the mayor's bartender-brother, Robert E. Lee. State officials seized the property and locked the door, only to find the owner, the bartender and the mayor himself forcing the door open again at 2:30 A.M. Lee testified that when he sought admission to the club, Chester Dowse, state liquor enforcement agent, refused him entrance and asked, "Who the hell are you?" When Lee introduced himself, Dowse reportedly remained unimpressed. Lee claimed that Dowse's "eyes were bloodshot, and he talked in a thick voice." With the help of police, Lee arrested Dowse and the other agent, H. S. Bell, charging them with "high handed methods" and failure to cooperate with local officials.²⁰

In his own account, Lee described a late-night phone call informing him that there were two liquor agents in the club with the blinds pulled down.

But they don't know that you can peek through the edge of the blinds and see what's going on. And he says, "There's a gang down watching them and they've got a couple of girls in there, and they're playing the juke box and drinkin' Jones' liquor." And so I thought this'd be interesting, and so I got dressed and went down there and I watched them for awhile. I finally called the chief of police, and they were havin' a hell of a time—makin' a lot of noise . . . I would guess there must have been close to 100 people standin' around there at midnight on the outside.²¹

The pamphlet authors concluded that in leading "a mob to overthrow the rule of law," Lee had committed an act "repulsive to moral concepts." In an overtly religious appeal, they concluded that it would be unfortunate, especially "for our young people," if the governorship fell to a man who entertained different morals than the majority of the state.²²

In spite of its usual interest in the moral issues of political campaigns, the Mormon Church wanted no responsibility for the pamphlet against Lee. The *Deseret News*, in a signed, front-page editorial by journalist David Robinson, which appeared just before the final election, dismissed it as a political ploy to "destroy J. Bracken Lee." The author claimed to have made an investigation into the "origin and aims of the pamphlet," but actually did not examine the city of Price to corroborate or defeat the argument. Robinson effectively reduced the moral argument by essentially ignoring Cannon and Kirkham, who were Republicans, and blaming the project completely on Gordon Hyde, a Democrat and chairman of Maw's state finance commission. Hyde's job allegedly hinged on Maw's reelection.²³

Lee conceded the basic validity of the pamphlet, though not its spirit or conclusions. He said it was cleverly done and "captured the imagination with the first paragraph." He said he actually had no answer for it because prostitution and other problems *did* exist in Price, although not to the extreme claimed in the pamphlet. He thought it significant that while wrongdoing was "implied," neither the Democratic district attorney nor the county attorney had chosen to prosecute. Lee regarded it as a political smear, and claimed that "church people" in Price came to his immediate defense, including Catholic priests and Mormon bishops.²⁴ There is no evidence, however, to support his claim. Political analysts have been quick to ascribe to the pamphlet a prominent role in Lee's narrow defeat that year of only 1,056 votes.²⁵

ELECTION OF 1948

Since Lee had come so close to victory, he again sought the governorship in 1948, when liquor was a crucial issue. In the past, Lee had created the impression that he favored the sale of liquor by the drink and had supported a plan to place the issue on the ballot for referendum in 1946. By 1948, however, he was saying that he was primarily against the corruption that had surrounded the state liquor commission and that sale by the drink was an issue for the people to decide.²⁶

Practical politics dictated that Lee tread gently on the liquor question because

of the Mormon Church's position. Apostle Joseph F. Merrill chaired a meeting with Lee and nine General Authorities to discuss it. Merrill recalled an hour-and-twenty-minute discussion, during which it was made clear to Lee that the Church was unalterably opposed to liquor by the drink, "gambling in any form, and to the loosening of the Utah moral laws relative to youth." After Lee left, they decided that "there were insufficient reasons why any church committee should oppose the election of Mr. Lee."²⁷

Lee's version of this meeting is different from Merrill's and outlines a role in Lee's political future for J. Reuben Clark, Jr., counselor in the First Presidency.

When I ran for governor the Church was most interested in liquor. They wanted to know my stand on liquor. I was called up to the church offices one day, and there must have been 100 men there—General Authorities, bishops, stake presidents—all to question me on liquor. I couldn't quite get my point across. I said that I didn't approve of the present law, that I thought it was corrupt and unenforceable, and I wanted a better one, but I wasn't necessarily for liquor by the drink.

Well, they wanted me to sign a statement saying that I would veto a liquor-by-the-drink law if it came across my desk. I wouldn't do it. Apostle Merrill read me the riot act. I said if that's what I have to do to be governor, then I don't want to be governor. . . . Well, I told him if I became governor, and I probably wouldn't now, if he ever came to my office and I talked to him like he talked to me just now, I would consider myself insulted. And I walked out.

And I told my campaign manager that I'd just lost the election because I'd lost church support. He said I'd better call Clark. So I called Clark. I went up to see him. I asked him if he knew about the meeting, and he did—he knew all about it. I asked him if he knew about Merrill telling me I wouldn't get church support. He didn't know that. He said, "Don't you worry." And that was the end of it. I got church support and was elected governor. If Merrill had had his way, he would have hurt me with that.²⁸

Since Apostle Merrill was known to be a Democrat, he would be more wary of Lee than Clark would have. If Lee's account is accurate, the meeting with church authorities could have spelled Lee's doom as a candidate instead of acting as the catalyst to the governor's chair. Rather it would seem that it was Lee's friendship with President Clark which overrode other considerations. Lee even went so far as to conclude:

I never could have been governor without J. Reuben Clark. They can say all they want to, but I am convinced that church leaders do talk over politics and that they do in most instances decide who they're gonna support.²⁹

Lee remembered that treatment from many delegates had been cool before Clark's endorsement, but that afterward support was "amazing." After a meeting with Clark, one delegate, a stake president in the Church who had withheld support, put his arm around Lee and said, "I've been in and talked to President Clark. You're all right." Before election and numerous times afterward, Lee sought what he always regarded as the best advice from Clark, whom he considered "one of the brightest men who ever lived in the whole country."³⁰

Certainly the most explosive facet of the campaign was Governor Maw's famous "Dear Brother Letter," which he sent to fellow Mormons. In a direct plea for votes, Maw insisted that he was not writing as governor of the state, but "as an active and devoted member of our Church." To prove his activity, he cited his service as a teacher, member of a ward bishopric, member of a stake high council and various other positions. Equally important, he said, "I am still active in the Church and speak in some ward nearly every Sunday night." Maw accused the "underworld" of opposing his re-election by launching a concerted effort to make Utah an "open state." Liquor by the drink would be obtained, he said, by "electing a governor who will eliminate the State Liquor Police Force and close his eyes to law enforcement." He implored fellow Mormons to oppose Lee and "sustain" Maw in this moral effort, and signed it "Sincerely Your Brother."³¹

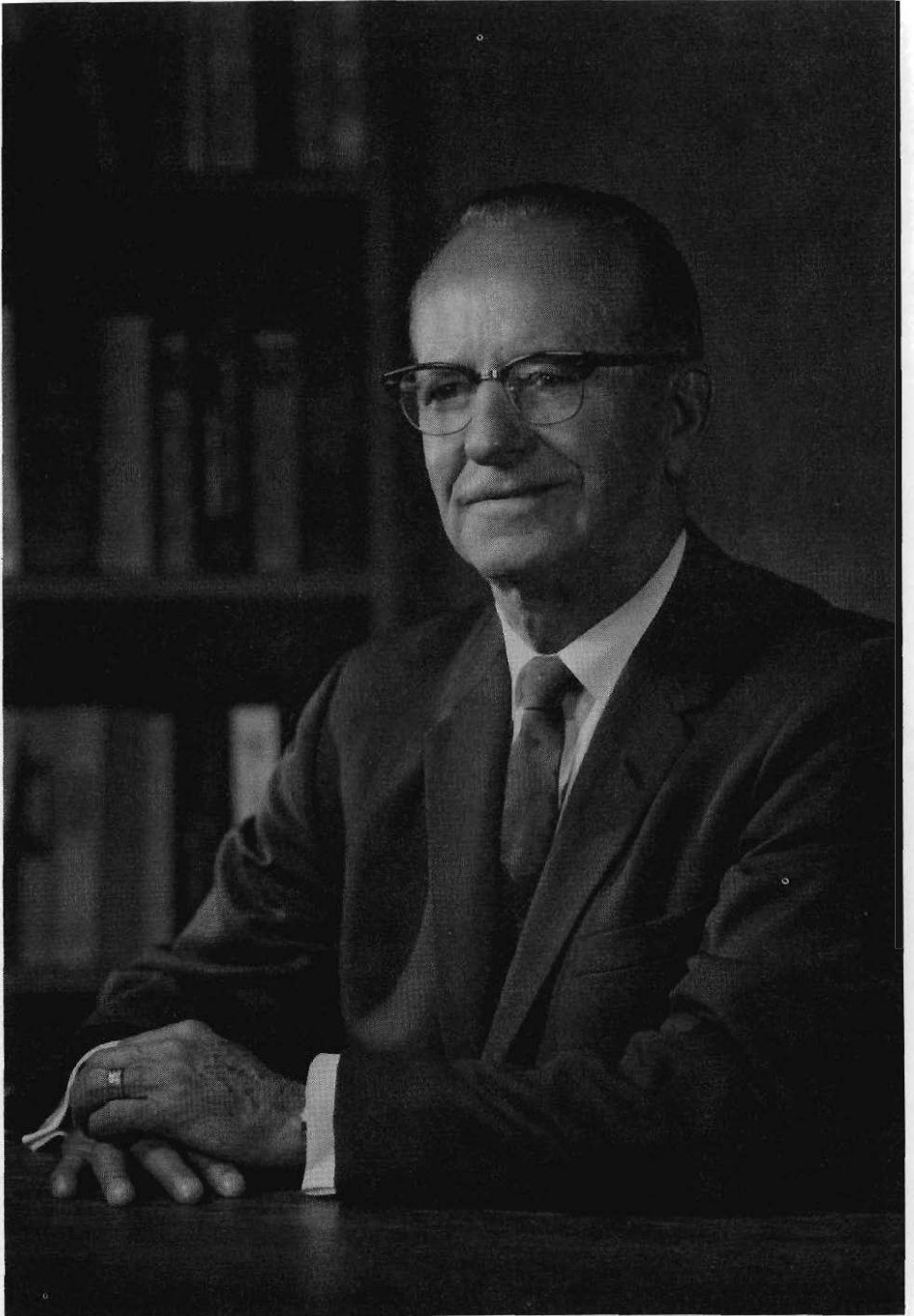
Criticizing Maw for so blatantly using the Church for votes, Lee said he did not believe that the Church "endorses the solicitation of its membership for political purposes."³² He also promised to enforce all state laws, "including the liquor laws and those safeguarding the morals of the people."³³ Although he was heavily criticized, Maw stood by the letter, denying that it was intended for Mormons only. "Thousands of copies will be sent to members of all faiths, Democratic or Republican."³⁴ But the careful choice of words used in the letter belied Maw's words.

The most important repercussions came through an editorial in the *Mount Pleasant Pyramid*, written by Tom Judd, grandson of former church President, Heber J. Grant. Judd said that Maw had reached "the lowest level of bigotry," by waving a banner of virtue "in an obvious attempt to obscure the dirty hem of his own garment, soiled by his scandalous fumbling of proven bribery in the Maw-controlled state liquor commission." He concluded that "Governor Maw's record doesn't jibe with Brother Maw's letter." The editorial was a political coup, since Ab Jenkins, a Mormon and noted speed driver, reproduced it as an advertisement and placed it in newspapers all over the state.³⁵

Republicans also tried to use the Church through a newspaper advertisement, purportedly from the "Law Observance Committee" of the Church in Salt Lake County. The committee had allegedly studied the positions of the candidates with respect to liquor by the drink, horse racing, slot machines, gambling and "other vices." They gave their "approval" to Lee because his positions were consistent with the "ideals of Utah citizenry."³⁶

The Republican technique was actually similar to Maw's, and it was followed by a hasty Democratic retort, "Don't be Fooled!! The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has at no time endorsed J. Bracken Lee." Of course, that was technically true. The Democratic ad quoted a spokesman for President George Albert Smith: "No one can speak for the Church except over the signature of the First Presidency, and an action by a committee of Church membership does not even imply action by the Church itself." The Democrats accused the Republicans of "sinking to a new low" in misleading the "saints" and "whitewashing" the record of Lee, who as recently as March 9, 1946 had headed a committee advocating liquor by the drink.³⁷

It was even more misleading than most people realized. The law enforcement and observance committee had not really endorsed any candidate. They listed



J. Bracken Lee

only those who were not favored one over another because of their positions on liquor, horse racing, and so on. The committee then included Lee and Maw as well as several other candidates of both political parties.³⁸ A negative endorsement at best, it suggested that there was no evidence to warrant opposition. The Republican ad was not only inaccurate, it was an unconscionable distortion.

Though not by official endorsement, the Church helped to elect Lee governor in 1948. While Truman defeated Dewey in Utah by almost 25,000 votes, Lee's plurality over Maw was 27,439.³⁹ Not only did Lee run ahead of Truman in Utah, he was the only Republican elected to state office and the first Republican governor in twenty-four years.

CHURCH INFLUENCE IN OFFICE

In spite of his key role in Lee's election, J. Reuben Clark, Jr. became much less visible in the day to day affairs of the governorship. The church official who communicated most with Governor Lee was a lower-echelon figure, Thorpe B. Isaacson, a member of the Presiding Bishopric.⁴⁰ Isaacson was a natural choice for the role because of his innate interest in politics. He made numerous attempts to exercise influence, beginning with a letter of congratulations upon Lee's election. Writing on church stationery, he predicted that Lee would be one of Utah's great governors. Then he expressed support for Lee's plan to reform the liquor system, and with the loaded phrase, "a number of us have discussed it," implied that the General Authorities supported it too. The evidence does not show that Isaacson was acting on behalf of the Church when he wrote to Lee, but he seemed to want Lee to believe that he was.⁴¹

Lee remembered it as "the most beautiful letter that you could imagine. I prized it, see. I took it home and showed it to my wife. He was a big Church man. Very flattering!" But two months later, Lee found a letter stuck to the top of one of his desk drawers. It had been written by Isaacson to Maw upon his election to the governorship eight years earlier, and "it was almost identical to the one he sent to me." The discovery naturally decreased the value of his own letter, and although Lee became friendly with Isaacson, he regarded him with considerably less respect.⁴²

Throughout Lee's two terms, Isaacson's letters continued to be frequent and partisan. Sometimes he spoke in his coveted role as Chariman of the Board of Trustees at Utah State Agricultural College. His personal biases against the teaching profession were stronger than Lee's, and he opposed teacher salary increases because, he said, many were already getting more money than they deserved. He was not opposed to increases for teachers or professors who were outstanding, but he was opposed to flat across-the-board raises, because they encouraged "misfit individuals in the profession."⁴³

When an education bill to increase teacher salaries reached the legislature, Isaacson wrote a letter to State Senator Elias Day, urging him to defeat it. "I have just sought counsel this morning, and I believe it is the opinion that now would be a very sad time to raise the taxes of our people . . ." ⁴⁴ Isaacson sent a copy of the letter to Lee with an accompanying explanation that "I have talked to authority here this morning, and certainly House Bill 75 should be defeated . . ." ⁴⁵ On the

same day, Isaacson sent a similar letter to Senator Marl Gibson in which the phrase was slightly different: "I have just come from a meeting where I asked for counsel and advice from some who I feel can give good counsel." He was allegedly told that it was time to say "no to these school teachers."⁴⁶ In the note to Lee, Isaacson added, "I sought counsel this morning, and I again can tell you that it is the feeling here that now would be a bad time to raise this tax levy in order to get more money for school teachers' salaries."⁴⁷ While the wording was purposefully obscure, the natural assumption is that the First Presidency or others of the General Authorities gave the counsel.

Lee evidently believed that Isaacson was speaking for the Church. "I actually don't believe that Thorpe ever did anything without consulting Clark." When Isaacson talked of consulting higher authority or seeking counsel, Lee interpreted it to mean J. Reuben Clark, Jr.⁴⁸ This explains why Lee could cultivate a relationship with Isaacson even though he did not respect him as highly as he did Clark.

At the 1952 annual convention of the Utah Education Association, Edgar Fuller, executive secretary of the National Council of Chief State School Officers and graduate of Brigham Young University, called for Lee's defeat in the November elections. He branded Lee "the worst enemy of schools among all the governors of the United States."⁴⁹ Shortly afterward, Fuller received a letter from the Presiding Bishopric of the Church reprimanding him for making a political speech critical of the governor of the state in a church building—the Assembly Hall on Temple Square. Since he believed that Lee's record was well known throughout the nation, Fuller was surprised that the bishopric would be "embarrassed" by his comments. He pointed out that the Assembly Hall had been used for meetings of a controversial nature and that the Tabernacle had been used only hours after that meeting for a political gathering.⁵⁰ As a member of the Presiding Bishopric, Isaacson had again used leverage in the name of the Church for a political issue and for Lee's protection.

Isaacson frequently requested Lee through grandiose letters to make key appointments, such as one requesting that Lee select a replacement for Trustee Matthew Cowley, a deceased apostle. Using his standard request style, Isaacson effusively praised Lee's leadership, claiming that never in the state's history had there been "such an honest government, free from graft or scandal, efficient, better roads, more money for schools," that Lee would always be admired and respected, and that he (Isaacson) was proud of his leadership. Finally, he got to the request; he wanted Cowley replaced with another apostle. "I don't believe anybody would object to such procedure, and I know no one would object to the appointment of Apostle LeGrand Richards." Richards, he said, had supported Lee loyally and had been a Republican all his life.

I do hope we can have him appointed right away. We need him. He will enjoy it. He will be grateful to you, and I know many others will be grateful. As I spoke to you about it before, I sought the counsel of President McKay, and he concurred in this appointment.⁵¹

Such an obvious approach irritated Lee, and in this case, he chose to defy Isaacson. In a terse reply, he expressed confidence in Richards, but explained that

there were numerous other applications for the vacancy. "I do not believe I will be able to appoint Mr. Richards to this particular vacancy but I will certainly keep in mind for the future."⁵² More than two years later, Lee did appoint Richards to the board.⁵³

Isaacson was explicit enough to invoke the name of President McKay, something he had carefully avoided in the past. Perhaps a more subtle approach would have been more effective in dealing with Lee. It was obvious that Lee only reluctantly accepted Isaacson as a messenger from the Brethren, but he did succumb to Isaacson's wishes about other appointments and named several church authorities to governing boards.⁵⁴ He was not averse to such appointments, as Maw had been.

In fact, Harold Simpson, Lee's press secretary, remembered heavy criticism because university boards were dominated by Mormon appointees. In 1955, he counted an Apostle, a member of the Presiding Bishopric, a stake president and a bishop all concurrently serving on the Utah State Board of Trustees.⁵⁵ Some critics ironically accused Lee of being "anti-Mormon" in his appointments. Lee remembered rumors that "church people" were disturbed because there were not enough Mormons in appointive positions. Through personal research, he discovered that two thirds of his appointments had been Mormons, although he had never asked anyone what his religion was prior to appointment. Lee claimed that he compiled a list of people with their religions and took it to Clark, who disclaimed any interest in such a list and advised, "Don't you hire anybody anywhere unless you trust them."⁵⁶ The mere compiling of such a list aptly illustrates Lee's desire to please the Church.

Although Lee maintained that attempts by General Authorities to influence his appointments and decisions were rare,⁵⁷ there is considerable evidence to the contrary. During his tenure, Apostles Delbert Stapley, Henry D. Moyle and Joseph F. Merrill, and Presiding Bishop Joseph L. Wirthlin, as well as many bishops and stake presidents, wrote to him frequently about appointments and political issues. Although some of the letters were written in assertive style on church stationery, none of them purported to be acting for the whole Church. Others were careful to draw the line between church and state by writing the letter on personal stationery and expressing personal motives.

For instance, when Wirthlin wrote Lee recommending an appointment,⁵⁸ he did it on personal stationery and made no reference to higher authority. Since Wirthlin was Isaacson's superior in the church hierarchy, this seems especially significant. Lee responded in standard fashion, as if he were writing to any other citizen.⁵⁹ Delbert L. Stapley wrote on church stationery to recommend Earl Hunsaker, a friend, to become superintendent of the highway patrol.⁶⁰ Lee was apparently unimpressed, for he wrote a standard letter to Stapley⁶¹ and eventually appointed Joseph Dudler, former Carbon County sheriff, under Lee in Price, to the post.⁶²

Henry D. Moyle wrote to Lee on personal stationery recommending the appointment of Homer Holmgren to the Utah Supreme Court and concluding that he was also "politically all right."⁶³ Lee responded in noncommittal fashion, assuring Moyle that "the number of applicants for this vacancy is considerable,"⁶⁴

and Holmgren was not appointed. One of the more obvious attempts to influence came from Franklin J. Murdock, president of the Highland Stake and head of Murdock Travel, the firm most readily identifiable with church travel accommodations. He recommended Judge Leland G. Larsen for the 3rd Judicial District, saying he had worked closely with him on the stake high council. Murdock promised Lee he would always be "at peace with his conscience" if he did the right thing and said he would watch the appointment with "keen interest."⁶⁵ It was evidently the wrong approach; Lee failed to comply. J. Leonard Love, a bishop, seemed to have more political clout through his business and social connections than some General Authorities. He complained to Lee about the dismissal of Judge Rulon Clark from the juvenile court, saying he had known him for twenty-five years and it was impossible to place a value on his services.⁶⁶ Clark was reinstated, and apparently Love's action on his behalf played a heavy role in the decision.

Lee recognized the important difference between persons with high church positions and church leaders who were delegated to speak for the Church. He was amenable to requests he interpreted as emanating from the Church, but resented requests from persons using their church positions to wield personal influence.

Lee believed that President McKay "didn't know anything about politics" and rarely interfered,⁶⁷ but he gave great weight to McKay's letters. Members of the Hillside Stake had complained about the presence of a liquor store in their neighborhood. As a member of the First Presidency, McKay requested that the store be moved to another part of the city. Lee discussed the matter with K. M. Doane, chairman of the liquor commission, who became irritated and according to Lee "bowed his neck against the church." McKay, however, was tolerant of the delay, and when the store was moved,⁶⁸ he complimented Lee for acting "wisely and well"⁶⁹ and expressed pleasure with Lee's contributions in office, especially in solving the "very perplexing liquor problem." McKay believed that Lee had "won the confidence of every clear-thinking person in the state."⁷⁰

The liquor store issue was the predictable case of the Church injecting itself into politics because of a moral issue so clear that intermediaries were unnecessary. Lee had no need to doubt that this was the Church itself making the request with David O. McKay as spokesman, even though many individual church leaders voiced strong feelings.⁷¹

In 1953, Lee was forced to deal with the controversial issue of Sunday closing. A bill was introduced in the legislature providing for the closing on Sunday of all places of business except those which dispensed services or provided activities necessary to health and life. Its intent was approved by the Utah Council of Churches and the Salt Lake Ministerial Association, meaning that Protestants as well as Mormons strongly supported it. The bill was passed by the legislature, six to one in the house and nearly two to one in the senate.⁷²

In spite of such convincing support, Lee vetoed it, arguing that such legislation must be "beneficial to all the people, without prejudice or discrimination to the few." He believed that Seventh Day Adventists, Jewish groups, and others whose principles of the Sabbath were markedly different from other Christian denominations, as well as the neighborhood grocer and other merchants who had to

depend on Sunday employment, would be discriminated against. "Social legislation is necessary in some cases, but there is truth in the axiom that you cannot legislate the morals of the people."⁷³

The *Deseret News* attacked Lee for offending "the great majority of Utah's citizens." The editors said that most states had Sunday closing laws (thirty-one plus the District of Columbia) and that Utah, "of all states," must "remain one of the very few places in America where a man has to work on Sunday unnecessarily in order to hold his job." The *News* concluded that Lee had made a mistake and urged the legislature to override the veto.⁷⁴ But the legislators were influenced by the governor and the veto was sustained. Lee had offended the Church on what its leaders interpreted as a clear moral issue. The veto marked the first decline of his church support.

The following year, in an effort to mend church fences and support his economy drive, Lee tried to transfer Weber, Snow and Dixie Junior Colleges to the Church, which had formerly owned and operated them but had deeded them to the state in the 1930s. Saying that a transfer would take a heavy burden off the state educational system, Lee praised the Church's record in education and suggested the change would be beneficial to the colleges themselves. President McKay reluctantly agreed, promising that the Church would take them, rather than see them close. He said that acceptance of the obligation to operate the colleges (amounting to \$1,000,000 per year) was sufficient and valid consideration and price for the transfer, but that the Church would still pay an amount considered to be fair and equitable. He promised that the colleges would be operated just as they had been in the past, with salaries, sabbaticals, tuition and so on remaining the same to avoid interference with normal operations and individual students. McKay pledged, in answer to critics, that they would not be transformed into "religious seminaries."⁷⁵

Accused by some people of suggesting the transfer "merely for votes," an angry Lee pointed out that he had vetoed the Sunday Closing bill, even though it was desired by the Church, and a bill to grant Brigham Young University power of eminent domain.⁷⁶ He was so disturbed by the charge that he sent a copy of a critical letter he had received to President McKay with his own answer enclosed. He wanted to be sure that McKay did not think he was pushing the transfer for political reasons. McKay replied that he too resented the insinuation that Lee had selfish or ulterior motives.

Whenever a person makes such an accusation, even by innuendo, as that made . . . against you, I cannot help but doubt his own integrity. I should put him in the class with the man who said, "There isn't an honest man in the world." Unthinkingly, he makes an admission that he, himself, is dishonest.⁷⁷

The transfer never took place. Although the bill was approved by the legislature and signed by the governor, it was tied to a referendum ballot, and Utah voters rejected it.⁷⁸ The result fully illustrates the independence of Utah voters, even when the president of the Church may be involved. Yet Lee no doubt believed that he had successfully patched a sagging relationship with the Church in the wake of Sunday closing.

While Lee enjoyed church support in 1944, 1948, and again in 1952, he definitely lost it in 1956. He became critical of Eisenhower, who was revered by many Mormons, and much of the support faded. The veto of the Sunday closing law was indeed damaging, and by 1955, his relationship with church authorities was tenuous. In 1956, church support went to Republican George Dewey Clyde for the governorship instead of to Lee, and Clyde was elected. Lee believes that the erosion of support actually began when McKay became president of the Church and made Stephen L. Richards his first counselor. That choice meant that Clark would be moved from first counselor to second counselor. According to Lee, "When McKay demoted Clark and put in a man named Richards, a life long Democrat, I noticed a difference. The support started to fade. When I didn't get that support for the Senate, I went to Clark, and asked him what happened. He said he couldn't tell me. He said, 'I don't have any influence in the Church any more.'" ⁷⁹

J. Reuben Clark, Jr. did have a reciprocal respect for Lee, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to him upon his election as mayor of Salt Lake City. He began the letter by saluting him as "Mr. Mayor," complaining that he must abandon the former address of "Governor." Lee had just sent him a handwritten Christmas letter of appreciation and apparently Clark was moved by its contents, because he expressed deep appreciation for a very great friendship, which included Lee's wife and children for whom Clark had "deep affection." Hoping he could refer to Lee familiarly as "Bracken," Clark requested a favor concerning a piece of property on First South Street in Salt Lake City which the Church wanted to purchase from the city. Applying some gentle pressure, Clark said he always kept Lee's confidences, "but I did tell the Brethren that you had assured me orally that you would do whatever you might do for us within the law." ⁸⁰

In spite of Lee's recent statement, "Clark never once asked me for anything," Clark was clearly exacting a price for the help he had offered Lee in past years. Then he closed with more niceties:

Again for all of your kindly protestations which I know are honest, of friendship and affection for me, I am most grateful, and mine come to you in return, and I assure you that the friendship which I have for you has never dimmed and I shall hope never to do anything that will make it dim and I receive with great joy your promise that the same situation is true of yourself.

God bless you, Brother Lee, with every blessing He has that is necessary for you to possess and enjoy in this great responsibility which now comes to you. ⁸¹

Hoping that Clark would continue to "honor" him by addressing him as "Bracken," Lee claimed that he had too much respect for him to address him as anything but "President Clark." He conscientiously explained that he was doing everything possible to meet Clark's request about the land sale and promised to expedite the matter. ⁸² In this instance, Lee wanted very much to assist the Church. Clark's request was clearly golden; since 1948, Clark and Lee had successfully maintained a "special relationship." Lee managed to make all the necessary arrangements for the sale within one month from the date he had received the letter from Clark. ⁸³

Lee evidently cultivated church support while he was Salt Lake's mayor, even though he believes that it is less crucial in governing the city and that it is possible for a non-Mormon to be elected in the city even though he could not be elected in the state. When asked about the importance of the Church in his political career, Lee wryly commented that it was about as important as the Catholic Church in Boston or the Baptist Church in Texas. He said that an anti-church candidate could not get elected to any office. Lee believes, in fact, that church officials often *prefer* non-Mormons to Mormons, and that non-Mormon governors have treated the Church more kindly.⁸⁴

The latter statement may be an exaggeration, but the evidence suggests that church leaders do prefer politicians who clearly recognize the role of the Church as Utah's most important interest group. Some Mormon politicians, such as Maw, have had difficulty maintaining an effective working relationship because they have been afraid of being perceived as puppets of the Church. Lee had no such problem. He not only understood the role of the Church in politics, but he recognized the vital need to cultivate the relationship.

Lee's experience suggests that church influence in politics is an unquestioned reality, even though its form varies. When the First Presidency exerts pressure on a political leader because of a moral issue, the influence is overt and unmistakable. The brethren clearly represent the institution. Sometimes the First Presidency exerts quiet influence intended to protect the Church or promote its growth, such as in land sales and ordinances. Often there are educational, economic, or social issues about which the First Presidency takes no overt stand and about which other church leaders disagree. On these, the First Presidency purposely remains silent, but allows other church leaders to make private, personal efforts to influence politicians. Some of these personal efforts may be sanctioned by higher church authority or a higher church authority may have even suggested that the letter or phone call be made, but great care is exercised by church authorities to avoid the appearance of intentional influence. The Church does not wish to be regarded as such a dominant political force in Utah that church and state will be regarded as one.

While there are interesting pieces of evidence, it is impossible to prove, for instance, that Thorpe Isaacson exerted pressures on Governor Lee under direct authority from the First Presidency. Isaacson undoubtedly requested opinions or "counsel" from other church authorities to carry to the governor. It seems undeniable that he wished to leave the impression that he was speaking for the Church. Governor Lee accepted that role, and the product was church influence. In this case, Isaacson had enough effect on Lee that he was interpreted to be the emissary of J. Reuben Clark, Jr., and hence, the institution. Lee took the influence seriously, even though he occasionally chafed under it and sometimes even rejected it. His enormous success in Utah politics must be equated with his ability to create that special relationship between church officials and himself.

NOTES

¹ Interview with J. Bracken Lee, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 27, 1972.

² See Lee Gubernatorial Papers, Utah State Archives, Salt Lake City. Examples of letters: Letter, J. S. Kimmel, Sr., President of Davenport, Iowa Chamber of Commerce, to Lee, Oct. 13, 1954; Letter, William R. Todd, Jr., Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lee, July 29, 1954.

³ *Deseret News*, Oct. 7, 1955.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1955.

⁵ *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1955.

⁶ Letters from Lee to Professor William H. Peterson, New York University, Dec. 13, 1955, and to Col. Slavko Trifkovic, Winchester, England, May 28, 1956. Lee papers.

⁷ *Deseret News*, May 31, 1956.

⁸ *Tribune*, April 14, 1956.

⁹ *Deseret News*, April 30, 1956.

¹⁰ *Tribune*, May 3, 1956.

¹¹ Interview with J. Bracken Lee, July 14, 1975. Lee recalls being so incensed that he wrote the Attorney General of the United States and requested an investigation of the IRS. He finally received the "snottiest damn letter from Henry Peterson," Assistant Attorney General, implying that Lee was a troublemaker. Lee sent copies of that letter to approximately twenty congressmen and senators as an example of a bureaucrat's treatment of a citizen. He suggested that Peterson should be fired. In his reply to Lee, Senator Barry Goldwater said he was surprised that a person of Lee's experience would think that Congress was running the country, "You *know* the bureaucrats are running the country!"

¹² Frank Jonas, "J. Bracken Lee and the Mormon Church," Utah Academy Proceedings, XXXIV (1957), 111.

¹³ Interview with Herbert B. Maw, Salt Lake City, Aug. 1, 1972. Jonas reports that Maw wrote him a letter, April 21, 1955, saying that Heber J. Grant, Church President, publicly denounced Maw for this action. See above article, 112.

¹⁴ Jonas, 111.

¹⁵ Maw interview.

¹⁶ Interview with Ezra Taft Benson, Salt Lake City, Aug. 15, 1972. Benson recalled visiting Lee in his home once when Lee had a severe case of flu. Benson told Lee that he'd "been praying for him. It touched him—you could tell." Apostle LeGrande Richards, also a Republican, expressed similar feelings about both Lee and Maw. Interview with Richards, Salt Lake City, July 2, 1972. (Unfortunately, much of this interview was "off the record.")

¹⁷ Maw Interview.

¹⁸ Francis W. Kirkham, *Morals and the Mayor* (1944), 3-5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1938; *Price Sun-Advocate*, Jan. 27, 1938.

²¹ Lee Interview, 1975.

²² Kirkham, 7, 8.

²³ *Deseret News*, Nov. 2, 1944.

²⁴ Lee interview, 1972.

²⁵ Jonas, 113.

²⁶ Lee said that the people should decide the issue in a letter to Jonas, Oct. 3, 1948, quoted by Jonas, 117.

²⁷ Letter from Joseph F. Merrill to Jonas, Nov. 6, 1948, *Ibid.*

²⁸ Lee interview, 1972.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Tribune*, Nov. 1, 1948.

³² *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1948.

³³ *Deseret News*, Oct. 15, 1948.

³⁴ *Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1948.

³⁵ *Mount Pleasant Pyramid*, Oct. 15, 1948.

³⁶ *Deseret News*, Nov. 1, 1948.

³⁷ *Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1948.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, 1948.

³⁹ Lee received 151,253 votes to Maw's 123,814. The only other Republican governor to win election that year was Arthur Langlie of Washington. In Utah, Truman received 149,046 to Dewey's 124,359.

⁴⁰ Isaacson was later made an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1961) and finally, a counselor in the First Presidency to President David O. McKay (1965).

⁴¹ Letter from Thorpe B. Isaacson to Lee, Nov. 3, 1948 Lee papers, Utah State Archives.

⁴² Lee Interview, 1972. Maw does not have any recollection at all of the letter. (Maw Interview.)

⁴³ Letter, Isaacson to Lee, January 11, 1951, Lee papers.

⁴⁴ Letter, Isaacson to State Senator Elias L. Day, Feb. 2, 1951, Lee papers.

⁴⁵ Letter, Isaacson to Lee, Feb. 2, 1951, Lee papers.

⁴⁶ Letter, Isaacson to State Senator Marl D. Gibson, Feb. 2, 1951, Lee papers.

⁴⁷ Letter, Isaacson to Lee, Feb. 2, 1951. Lee papers.

⁴⁸ Lee Interview, 1972.

⁴⁹ Logan, Utah *Herald-Journal*, Oct. 12, 1952.

⁵⁰ Letter, Edgar Fuller to Presiding Bishopric, Oct. 20, 1952, Lee papers.

⁵¹ Letter, Isaacson to Lee, Dec. 23, 1953. Lee papers.

⁵² Letter, Lee to Isaacson, Dec. 29, 1953. Lee papers.

⁵³ Appointment document, Feb. 26, 1956 to July 1, 1956. Lee papers.

⁵⁴ For instance, Lee named Alma Sonne, assistant to the Twelve, to the Board of Trustees at Utah State almost immediately after Isaacson's request. Letter, Isaacson to Lee, Jan. 20, 1955; Letter, Lee to Isaacson, Jan. 25, 1955. He had also appointed Matthew Cowley to the same board. Letter, Lee to Quale Cannon, Jr., Sec. of State Senate, Mar. 11, 1953, announcing appointment of Cowley. Lee appointed Richard L. Evans, an Apostle, to the University of Utah Board of Regents. Letter, Lee to Cannon, Mar. 16, 1955.

⁵⁵ Letter from Harold W. Simpson to Frank Jonas, Mar. 15, 1955. Lee papers.

⁵⁶ Lee Interview, 1972.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Letter, Joseph L. Wirthlin to Lee, Feb. 5, 1953. Lee papers.

⁵⁹ Since Isaacson was a counselor to Wirthlin in the Presiding Bishopric, it could be assumed that Wirthlin would carry more weight with Lee than Isaacson. Obviously, such was not the case.

⁶⁰ Letter, Delbert L. Stapley to Lee, June 30, 1952. Lee papers.

⁶¹ Letter, Lee to Stapley, July 14, 1952. Lee papers.

⁶² Logan *Herald-Journal*, Nov. 21, 1952.

⁶³ Letter, Henry D. Moyle, to Lee, Nov. 6, 1953. Lee papers.

⁶⁴ Letter, Lee to Moyle, Nov. 9, 1953. Lee papers.

⁶⁵ Letter, Franklin J. Murdock to Lee, July 2, 1956. Lee papers.

⁶⁶ Letter, J. Leonard Love to Lee, June 24, 1949. Lee papers.

⁶⁷ Lee Interview, 1972.

⁶⁸ Letter, Lee to Pres. McKay, Oct. 13, 1949. Lee claimed that several prominent Mormons were frequenting liquor stores and Doan obtained cards on a stake president and a bishop and members of the bishopric of the area who had allegedly been buying liquor on the west side of the city. Lee suggested that it was "embarrassing as hell," because Doan accused these people of being too cowardly to buy liquor from a nearby store so their neighbors could witness it. (Lee Interview, 1972)

⁶⁹ Letter, McKay to Lee, Oct. 31, 1949.

⁷⁰ Letter, McKay to Lee, Dec. 7, 1949. McKay said Lee's integrity was unquestioned and commended him on his instruction that no liquor be served at Christmas parties in the state capitol. Lee agreed that the use of liquor at such gatherings not only degraded the capitol but the office holder as well. Letter, Lee to McKay, Dec. 8, 1949. Lee papers.