The Mormon Church and the Spanish-American War: An End to Selective Pacifism

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The impact of the Spanish-American War on the people of the American West has been overshadowed by its profound effect upon the American nation as a world power. A little-known sidelight to the war is the influence that it exerted upon the Mormons. For a half century the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) had maintained its right to participate or not participate in any given conflict, the discretionary power resting with the current prophet. This position, which can be called "selective pacifism," was derived from Mormon theology and was inseparable from the Mormon "Kingdom of God," one of the most powerful theocratic autonomies in nineteenth-century America. When the Mormon Church was forced by the federal government to abandon polygamy in 1890, it lost some of its political and social power. Another significant step in the disintegration of that power was the elimination in 1898 of selective pacifism, a practice that was abandoned following an internal conflict in the church over Mormon participation in the Spanish-American War.

The Mormon theological aspects of pacifism were first discussed by Joseph Smith, Jr.1 Claiming to have had communion with the deity as early as 1820, Smith asserted that his canonical writings and pronouncements were equal, if

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not superior, to the authority of the Bible. His first production of new scriptures was the Book of Mormon, published in 1830 as a translation of the writings of pre-Columbian residents of America. His own revelations were published in 1835 as the Doctrine and Covenants of the Latter Day Saints. During Smith's lifetime, these two volumes, together with the Bible, continued the canon of Mormon theology and were the basis of nineteenth-century Mormon attitudes toward war and peace.  

The Book of Mormon, first of all, dispenses with the traditional cleavage between the Old and New Testaments concerning war. The warlike Jehovah and the pacifistic Christ are represented as the same individual; commands to kill and exhortations to peace are uttered by the same divine being. The heroes of the book are involved in successive wars of defense against aggressors for which they are specifically absolved of wrong-doing. In the accounts of the valor of these defenders (especially with reference to the warriors called Sons of Helaman), there seems to be an enthusiasm for militarism. (1 Ne. 19:7–10; Alma 43:46–47; 46:11–21, 30–31; 53:18–22; 56:10–11.)

Along with these examples of militarism, however, there are also evidences of pacifism in the Book of Mormon. One group refuses to participate in one of these "defensive" wars and even allows itself to be massacred. Its members seem to feel their spiritual welfare precludes shedding the blood of their enemies. Although the dominant segment of the community has to jeopardize itself to defend these pacifists, praise rather than condemnation is given to the noncombatants who paid to their protectors a large amount of money to defray the military costs deriving from their nonparticipation. (Alma 24:1–22; 27:21–30.) Toward the end of the narrative one of the generals of the army refuses to lead his people into battle because of his disgust at their motives for war and atrocities they commit. His position is not condemned in the book but emerges as one deserving commendation (Morm. 3:11, 16; Moro. 9:9–10.) These two examples significantly contrast with isolated instances in which men who refused to defend the community are executed because they sought to subvert it in favor of the enemy.  

Conscientious pacifism is as much an accepted practice within the Book of Mormon narrative as is militarism.

The foundations of Mormonism's theological position on war and pacifism were further defined in revelations announced by Joseph Smith. With the admonition to "renounce war and proclaim peace," an 1833 pronouncement assures the Latter-day Saints that God will protect them and fight their battles. Individuals and their families are instructed to endure attacks from enemies until the fourth assault. At the fourth attack, retaliation in kind is authorized, but the revelation promises that continued forbearance will bring God's blessing upon the individual and generations of his descendants. In reference to war, the document states, "And again, this is the law that I gave unto mine

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2 This article will focus primarily upon the question of Mormon participation in war, rather than upon the more diffuse question of violence on the Mormon frontier.

3 Alma 46:53; 62:9–11. Commenting on the fate of these men as described in the narrative, Mormon historian Hugh Nibley writes: "These were no pacifists or draft-evaders, but were [insurgents] armed to the teeth. . . ." BYU Studies 14 (Autumn 1973): 122.
ancients, that they should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people, save I the Lord, command them (D&C 98:12-16, 22-38). The document further specifies that after the fourth attack by an enemy nation, the people are justified in going to war.

This early pronouncement by Joseph Smith presupposes three essentials concerning Mormon participation in war. First, the decision of participation or nonparticipation in war is independent of the prerogatives of secular government. The authority of secular government is conspicuous by its absence in this document. Second, this policy statement on war assumes that divine injunctions for war and peace will be conveyed through the Mormon prophet, God's spokesman on earth, rather than by any secular leader. Third, the document presupposes that in matters of war and peace the Mormon community will give absolute obedience to the commands of the prophet, irrespective of the decisions of governmental authority, either local or national.

Thus, as early as 1833 the Mormon Weltanschauung implied a theocratic community independent of secular government. Moreover, in 1831 another of Smith's revelations had affirmed: "And it shall come to pass, among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion [the central habitation of the Latter-day Saints] for safety" (D&C 45:68-69). The Mormon community was intended to be a haven for those seeking to avoid participation in national wars. It was not until 1844, the year of his death, that Joseph Smith actually organized the Mormon community as a theocratic commonwealth with a prophet-king, a governing political body ("Council of Fifty"), and a grand design to establish a Mormon state within a state. In these early revelations on war Smith presaged the establishment of Mormon theocratic prerogatives.

The developing tradition of the church during Smith's administration mirrored his theological dualism with respect to war. When the Mormons in Jackson County, Missouri, were mobbed by anti-Mormons in 1833, they suffered without retaliating. Smith, however, in 1834 organized a military company, "Zion's Camp," which he led a thousand miles from Ohio to Missouri to win back Mormon losses by force if necessary. Upon reaching Missouri, Smith faced a suicidal confrontation with the Missourians. Recognizing that the kingdom of God would not be advanced through a Thermopylae, he became conciliatory with the anti-Mormons and the company returned to Ohio without bloodshed. In 1836, the church organ, Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate, carried an editorial arguing at length in favor of defensive war by

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threatened communities, implying the Mormons had that right. Yet during the same month Smith issued a letter stating that the Mormons "would suffer their rights to be taken from them before shedding blood." In 1836 the Mormons did exactly that, allowing themselves to be peacefully expelled from Clay County, Missouri, where they had fled from the mobs in Jackson County. Depending upon whether nonviolence or armed resistance was most advantageous, the contradiction in the two official statements would presumably be resolved according to the needs of the latter-day kingdom.

Two years later in Caldwell County, Missouri, Mormon ambivalence concerning war was brought into a sharp and disastrous focus. On 4 July 1838, Smith's first counselor in the church, Sidney Rigdon, delivered a sermon in which he stated that the Mormons would annihilate their enemies in the event of anti-Mormon attacks. Joseph Smith himself allegedly made some inflammatory remarks during this period, proclaiming himself as a modern Mohammed and threatening holy war under the motto: "Joseph Smith or the Sword." After two expulsions, this hyperbole was intended to intimidate the Mormons' enemies; instead it enraged them. The Mormons were marshaled for defense in a county militia under the control of Church leaders. In addition, a secret guerrilla organization of reprisal, the "Danites," had been organized by some prominent Mormons. A fracas on election day ignited anti-Mormons and Mormons into open hostilities. Suffering murder, rape, and pillage, most Mormons chose to flee their enemies rather than fight. The Danites, however, waged guerrilla reprisals against the non-Mormons, and virtual civil war resulted. By this time the Mormon militia and anti-Mormon militia were in open confrontation. A Mormon apostle, David W. Patten, was killed at the so-called Battle of Crooked River, and seventeen Mormons were murdered at Haun's Mill by a company of the Missouri militia. Encircled by anti-Mormon forces at the Mormon settlement of Far West, Smith and other leaders of the church were betrayed to the mercy of their enemies. Far West became the scene of wholesale rape, brutality, and destruction by the anti-Mormon militia, while Joseph Smith and other church leaders narrowly escaped summary execution. Smith officially repudiated the Danites, and excommunicated one of the Danite leaders. The Mormons were expelled from Missouri, and Smith languished for six months in prison.\(^6\)


Ambivalence with respect to war continued at the next haven for the Mormons in Illinois. Draining a swamp land on the Mississippi, the Mormons erected the city of Nauvoo. Joseph Smith became lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion, which by 1844 may have had as many as four thousand men in its ranks. Aside from the pomp and spectacle of this Mormon army, its existence (though legal) bespoke disturbing implications of the prerogatives assumed by Joseph Smith as the commander-in-chief, mayor of Nauvoo, and in 1844 candidate for the U.S. presidency. Smith's designs pointed westward rather than eastward, however, and by 1844 he had already decided the Mormons would have to go into the unsettled West for their protection. In June 1844, Smith, after being charged with the destruction of a printing press used by Mormon dissenters who opposed polygamy, voluntarily surrendered himself to the custody of unsympathetic officials. He did so even though it appears he was convinced that by so doing he would be murdered. When a mob entered his prison cell to kill him, he fired upon them with a pistol he had obtained for his last defense. His successor, Brigham Young, wisely chose not to use the Nauvoo Legion for a retributive attack which the mobs feared would follow the assassination of the prophet. Living in fear of his own life, Young carried a bowie knife for self-protection at Nauvoo, yet he had nightmares about the possibility of killing an assailant. Rather than test the ability of the Nauvoo Legion to protect the Mormons in their own city, Young negotiated a truce, and in 1846 led the Mormons in an orderly retreat into the wilderness.

As the Mormons were preparing to leave United States territory for the Great Basin, in Mexican territory, the Mexican War developed. Young had

Saints (commonly called Mormons) Including an Account of the Author of Leaving the Church (St. Louis: By the Author, 1839); Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), pp. 208–40; Reed C. Durham, Jr., “The Election Day Battle at Gallatin,” BYU Studies 13 (Autumn 1972): 36–61; Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, ed., American Violence: A Documentary History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 301–4; and Roberts, History of the Church 3:41–340 (esp. p. 167n). Joseph Smith's responsibility for organizing and promoting the Danites is still a question subject to analysis. In addition to the testimony on the Danites found in Documents containing the Correspondence..., assertions concerning the Danites can be found in Jerald Tanner, ed., The Reed Peck Manuscript: An Important Document Written in 1839, Concerning the Mormon War in Missouri and the Danite Band (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, [1965]); Harold Schindler, Orrin Porter Rockwell, Man of God, Son of Thunder (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966); and John D. Lee, Mormonism Unveiled (St. Louis, Mo.: Bryan, Brand & Co., 1877), pp. 57–85. Evidence that Joseph Smith and the highest leaders of the Church had only transitory association with the Danites is indicated in Corrill, Brief History, pp. 31–32. Moreover, the personal journal of Luman Andros Shirliff, a member of the Danites in Missouri, records his mistrust of such high Mormon ecclesiastics as John Taylor, because they were not privy to the secret oaths of the Danite organization. Lyman Andros Shirliff, Journal (Oct. 1838), 1:125, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives. In the minds of some Danites, however, there was no distinction between the Danites and the official Mormon militia. See Albert P. Rockwood to unknown, 29 Oct. 1838, Albert P. Rockwood Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

8 History of the Church, 6:555, 618. The bowie knife incident is related in Wilford Woodruff, Journal, 12 Sept. 1857, LDS Church Archives. Reference to Young's nightmares about shedding blood is in John D. Lee, Diary, 17 March 1846, Church Archives.
sent an ambassador to President James K. Polk, volunteering 2,000 Mormon men to enlist and form an expeditionary force which would precede the Mormon emigrants into the Great Basin and the American Northwest. Now that the war had begun, this regiment of Mormons would liberate Mexican territory for the American government, and the Mormon pioneers would occupy it. The entire operation would be conducted, according to Young’s design, in a region of Mexican territory which was devoid of Mexican troops and which, therefore, did not require Mormon soldiers to engage in actual warfare.

The canniness of this scheme was not unnoticed by Polk, who countered the offer with the proposal that only 500 men be enlisted to march along the present U.S.-Mexican border to California, engaging the enemy where necessary. This not only destroyed Young’s hope of having a government-employed vanguard of Mormons along the pioneer route, but it also put the Mormon volunteers in the position of possibly having to fight Mexican forces. Having made the original offer of volunteers, Young could hardly refuse Polk’s counter-proposal, but he promised the volunteers in the Mormon Battalion that they would not have to shed blood in military engagements. His prediction was fulfilled.9

Young complied with the counteroffer and persuaded the Mormons to enlist for the economic benefits. Nevertheless, incensed that Polk had not only frustrated his plans but had also put the Mormon volunteers in jeopardy, Young began to intimate that the whole idea had been foisted upon him by Polk as a plot to injure the Mormons.10 Despite Young’s disappointment, the battalion brought cash in excess of $50,000 to the common fund of the church.11 The Mormon Battalion did not fulfill Brigham Young’s anticipations for a military expedition of Mormon explorers and pioneers, but it represented a willingness to give limited support to a military effort in order to benefit the larger needs of the Mormon kingdom. Ironically, in later years the Mormon Battalion would be cited as an example of patriotic response to the nation’s wartime needs.

Although Brigham Young continually sought peaceful relations with the native Americans in the Great Basin, he did not oppose Mormons defending themselves against Indians. Young’s policy was to educate the Indians, proselyte them, and have Mormon missionaries marry Indian women. When Indian wars occurred, Young sought for cessation of hostilities without punitive retribution. During the first decades of Utah’s territorial period, the Mormons

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