Spinning Gold: Mormonism and the Olympic Games[1]

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AS IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS, certain events in the lives of cities leave such a mark that time is thenceforth measured in terms of before and after. For example, following the Columbian Exposition that brought more than 27 million people to Chicago in 1893, that city would always be something more than "hog butcher to the world." The dazzling Midway Plaisance, one of the fair's highlights, soon disappeared. But an amazing stretch of parks and buildings along Chicago's Lake Michigan waterfront continues to be a reminder that this Midwestern metropolis was once host to the world.

With the era of world's fairs apparently over, the quadrennial Olympic Games come closest to being the pre-eminent time-focused occasions that attract people from everywhere to particular geographic spaces. And just as the mammoth exhibitions of earlier days always left their mark on the urban spaces in which they were held, so Olympic sites are forever changed. Sometimes the municipal arenas in which the games are held are so immense—Los Angeles and Atlanta come to mind—that their long-term impact is diminished by the very complexity of urban existence that gushes in to fill the vacuum left when the sports figures and the observers who came to watch them perform go away. But urban cultural lacunae are often created in the aftermath when the games are held in mid-sized or even small cities, as is usual with the winter Olympics.

While permanent physical changes in urban landscapes always remain, the years of preparation and anticipation lead up to periods of intense activity and excitement that turn out to be all-too brief. As a result, a let-down stage usually ensues in Olympic cities. When the weather is all wrong and tourists stay away, disappointment is palpable. But when the weather is fine and visitors to the games arrive in droves, as was the case in Salt Lake City in 2002, the situation

1. An earlier, much shorter version of this article entitled "The Mormons Score a 9.6" appeared in the Spring 2002 issue of *Religion and the News*, a publication of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

changes. Rather than the vinegary disappointment of dashed hopes, a feeling of nostalgia develops when everyday reality testifies to the fleeting nature of this exhilarating, once-in-a-lifetime experience. Even so, questions gradually reappear. Everyone from the city fathers to ordinary citizens begins to wonder whether it was all worth it. Were, as the cliché puts it, the games worth the candle? Did the effort to be the center of the universe for two or three weeks produce much of permanent value?

As far as Utah's capital city is concerned, answers to these significant questions appear to be somewhat mixed.[2] If image making is taken into account, however, there is little question that holding the Olympic games in Salt Lake City had what appear to be enduring positive consequences for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In fact, if stereotypes were literally frozen, the ice-covered floor of the stadium where the closing ceremonies of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games were held would have been difficult to negotiate. Because of the disintegration of two conventional stereotypes that, before 2002, had been almost as solid and compact as crystal, the rink would have been littered with shards of shattered ice.

During the publicity blitz leading up to the February 8, 2002, opening ceremonies and in the following three weeks when reporting from Salt Lake City reached Olympian proportions, the notion that Mormonism is a provincial out-of-the-way faith tradition mainly ensconced in the inter-mountain American West gave way. It was replaced by a conception of a worldwide church led by forward and outward looking, albeit elderly, men. The other stereotype that came crashing to earth was the notion that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are all clean-cut and polite but somewhat spooky zealots whose main goal is making converts.

Demolishing these stereotypes was not entirely the media's doing. During their three weeks in Utah, tourists new to Mormon land saw for themselves how mistaken were notions of the Latter-day Saints as goody-goody quaint folks who are part of a decidedly odd, slightly fantastic, and unusually mysterious religious organization. Rather than being pestered to convert to their faith, most visitors encountered Latter-day Saints who were doing their best to be "gracious hosts." They lent assistance when asked but otherwise were simply friendly to the max. Youthful "lady missionaries" on the church's historic Temple Square were eager to answer questions, but only at that site. Elsewhere the Saints were simply there to be helpful and, equally significant, to join in the fun.

On the other hand, many Olympic visitors had their attention solicited away from the celebratory atmosphere by pushy representatives of the independent

2. In many instances, Olympic site cities lose money, but thanks to the efforts of Mitt Romney, who was brought in to head the Salt Lake Organizing Committee, this was not true in Salt Lake City. The games turned out not to be a financial drain on the city's coffers. See the many reports of the financial success of the games that were printed in the *Deseret News* and *Salt Lake Tribune* in the weeks following the close of the games.

Baptists and a variety of other conservative Protestant groups who warned that the time for being "born again" had come. In addition, around Temple Square and the LDS church's new 21,000-seat Conference Center, members of several different ex-Mormon and anti-Mormon organizations issued warnings to sightseers. Their message was that what they were seeing of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on its home turf is not what you get if you become a follower of the Mormon prophets who lead the church.

But visitors come and they go, usually without making enough difference to truly alter perceptions. In this instance, the print and electronic coverage of Mormonism accompanying the coverage of the athletic contests served as the real impetus for a changed view of the Church of Jesus Christ and its members, a perceptual transformation that is unlikely to be ephemeral. While certain elements of the older Mormon image may linger for a long time, the themes and substance of the media's reportage created a new image. The tattered, pre-Olympic, popular portrait of the Latter-day Saints as a weird people controlled by the leaders of a downright menacing ecclesiastical institution will never again take quite the shape that it had before the happy Olympic crowd heard the familiar exclamation, "Let the games begin."

The splintering of the older Mormon stereotypes was not accidental. Getting rid of them was the result of a public relations campaign that was carefully planned by Mormon leaders and effectively orchestrated by the Public Affairs Division of the church's bureaucracy.[3] In the largest sense, the campaign's objective was to take advantage of the holding of the games in Salt Lake City by turning the Olympics into an occasion for introducing modern Mormonism to the world.

The opening move in the church's elaborate public relations undertaking was the distribution of miniature faux leather briefcases with the LDS Olympic logo stamped on them in gold to 3,600 journalists across the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. Cute and catchy enough to get attention, this card-holder sized gimmick contained an extensive list of "great story ideas" about Mormonism-the church's "worldwide humanitarian service," for example, "health code helps Mormons live longer," "a day in the life of a missionary," and on and on. Implicit rather than explicit in this list was the assertion that, in the opening years of the 21st century, such stories would be far more appropriate as accompaniments to Olympic coverage than stories about polygamy or the Mountain Meadows Massacre.[4]

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3. The author is grateful to Michael Otterson for several face-to-face interviews and a series of telephone conversations in which he shared with her information about how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints planned and carried out a media campaign in connection with the holding of the Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. Otterson also provided information gathered by the church's Public Affairs Division about media coverage during and after the games.

4. Modern media attention would be directed to the dreadful 1857 catastrophe first as a consequence of Sally Denton, "What Happened at Mountain Meadows?" *American Heritage* (October 2001). Of greater significance was Will Bagley's *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the*

This opening gambit was followed up with the distribution of a handsome four-color "Glimpses of Utah" calendar in which nine of the fifteen images and well over half the accompanying text dealt with Mormon themes. Then came the mounting of an easy-to-use link from the church's home page (www.lds.org) designed for reporters from the electronic as well as print media who would be covering the games. This web site provided all sorts of resources that would make it easy for journalists to write or produce stories about the Latter-day Saints and their church, including downloadable, high-resolution photographs and TV and radio sound clips about virtually every aspect of Mormonism. It also served as the base for a rapid response mechanism that allowed Public Affairs staff members to provide accurate information to correct error-filled stories and to challenge negative depictions of Mormonism and its role in Utah's culture.[5]

In the 12 months prior to the opening of the games, the points the church wanted to get across were refined and honed to a sharp edge. These points were positive rather than negative. They were, first and foremost, that Mormonism is "Christian but different." Also, Mormonism is a practical religion that bears fruit in the quality of family relationships as well as in health and longevity; and the Mormon gospel brings joy that bears fruit in the self-esteem of believers, leading Latter-day Saints to have happy and satisfying lives.

During this same time span, the Public Affairs staff was gradually increased so that help would always be available to journalists assigned to do lead-in stories about the coming of the games to Mormon land. But this addition to the church's PR staff was only preliminary to the opening in mid-January of an LDS News Resource Center staffed by Public Affairs specialists assisted by 350 volunteers. This facility turned out to be such a boon to accredited journalists that 1,324 reporters registered so that they could have access to the Center's rich store of information—and to all the croissants, fruit, and other snack foods they wanted. But, naturally, no coffee.

Almost two-thirds of the working journalists who registered to use the Center's help were from the United States. Substantial numbers were from Japan and Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, Germany and Austria, Switzerland and Italy, Scandinavia and the Netherlands, Russia and Eastern Europe. Smaller numbers came from South America and elsewhere. Most worked for newspapers, magazines, television and radio networks and local stations, and even for "webzines." Since, however, it was necessary to have credentials and a definite assignment to register to use the LDS church's Resource Center,

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Massacre at Mountain Meadows (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). No evidence suggests that the media campaign conducted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in connection with the Olympic Games had anything to do with heading off the negative Latter-day Saint image that would be portrayed by Denton and Bagley. The church's reaction to those works would come from its Historical Department, not from Public Affairs.

5. The church's official website has a permanent link to media mistakes that is called "Mistakes in the News."

most of the army of free-lance journalists who were in the city for the games hung out at the Salt Lake Organizing Committee's press station in the Salt Palace located nearby.

Surely all this effort figured into the way that Mormonism was covered in the tens of thousands of stories about the Olympic Games filed all across the world between early December 2001 and the end of February 2002. An overwhelming majority—perhaps 95 percent—of the stories that featured Mormonism and/or the LDS church were either "positive or fair," according to Michael Otterson, the LDS church's Director of Media Relations, who was responsible for the creation of the News Resource Center. He became the church's primary spokesperson during the games and has said that a much higher percentage of the print and electronic media reports had mistaken information in them, but that "he could count on the fingers of both hands" the truly negative articles published in English language newspapers.[6]

International coverage of the Latter-day Saints and their church underwent a significant shift during the period leading up to the games and during the games themselves. Before the games opened, the coverage was mostly fair, in that it was correct as far as the facts were concerned. But lots of cynicism was exhibited in the materials (both print and electronic) that were collected by the "clipping service" dimension of the Public Affairs Division. Once the games began, Otterson said "cynicism disappeared." Instead, funny articles about not being able to find a Mormon when you want one, and so on, started appearing in the international press.

Naturally, most of the international coverage was concerned with the games themselves. But as an example of the connection between the games and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in German print coverage, 6600 articles at least mentioned the church; 2700 articles mentioned the church "substantially;" and 1700 articles were directly about the church. In its extended examination of media coverage after the close of the games, Public Affairs analysts concluded that the tenor of media coverage in the international arena did not differ substantially from the overwhelmingly positive coverage of the church in the U.S. media.

Because the payoff on the church's efforts to influence media coverage was so successful, one might be tempted to think that the possibility of mounting such an orchestrated campaign (explained in the interpretive language of the faith as "being helpful" and serving as "gracious hosts") was the reason that successful LDS business leaders in Salt Lake City led the charge to get the games. No evidence suggests that the church was, in fact, the animating force behind the effort to get the games for Utah. Indeed, quite the reverse seems to be true.

The reasons are obvious. In the 1980s, when the Olympics for Salt Lake

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6. Collecting and analyzing media coverage is one of the responsibilities of the church's Public Affairs Division.

City movement was first taking shape, the attention of the leadership hierarchy of the LDS church was directed elsewhere. The church was then experiencing virtually exponential growth that was stretching its central leadership cadre thin. A new bureaucracy had come into being in the 1960s and 1970s to handle the logistics of being a worldwide church. Still, without a paid clergy, the members of church's First Presidency and Council of the Twelve—who would have had to make the decision to get the church involved in seeking the games—were fully engaged in the cultivation of the lay leadership all across the globe. They were also busy with other activities directly connected to the church's membership growth and geographical expansion.

Probably never in modern memory has there been a time when the church hierarchy was not mindful of what outsiders thought of the church and its members. But at this particular juncture in the church's history, the matter of outside perception was of much less concern than finding a means of translating scriptures, creating intra-church communication networks, and developing leadership at the local level, without which the church would have been unable to function.

Besides that, the occasion of the church's sesqui-centennial made 1980 a time of celebration. At least for the short term, the attention of church leaders was directed inward and backward to the past. A great majority of Americans still thought of Mormonism as a curiosity and its adherents as quaint but nice people who didn't smoke or drink and who took care of their own. But at the time when the Olympics for Utah movement was initiated, worry about public image was not at the top of the Mormon agenda.

During the church's first hundred years (1830-1929), the Saints' image had been negative, sometimes extremely negative. Fifty years later that image had been replaced by a much more positive notion of Mormons as admirable, patriotic people whose primary concern was protecting family values. When the committee to seek the Olympic bid for Salt Lake City was first formed, the incendiary charge that Mormonism is not Christian, a charge that members of conservative Protestant groups have been using to vilify the Saints for the past two decades, was just beginning to surface. Neither the members of the church's hierarchy nor the staff of the LDS church office charged with public relations, then known as the Public Communications Department, seem to have anticipated the lengths to which the church would need to go to counter the "Mormonism is not Christian" accusation.[7]

Actually, success in getting the Olympic Winter Games for Utah was a development devoutly wished for by the state's burgeoning tourist industry. Hosting the games appeared to be the most effective possible means of telling the world that Utah is a perfect natural habitat for skiers and other devotees of win-

7. The title of the part of the church bureaucracy charged with media relations has changed several times across the years. As indicated, it was once known as the Public Relations Department. Currently it is known as the Public Affairs Division of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

ter sports. Besides that, nearly everyone believed that the prospective presence of hundreds of thousands of visitors to the city in a brief yet highly visible stretch of time would generate significant development such as an improved airport facility, an expanded and improved ground transportation system, and new hotels and restaurants. All this, it was assumed, would help to make Utah an even more popular tourist destination.

What's more, placing the spotlight on Salt Lake City and Utah would reveal to the world that this intermountain metropolis is city of the future, not of the past. Being described as the "Intermountain Silicon Valley" (something many were certain would be a central part of Olympic hype) would also be a boon to the state, making it appear to be on the economic cutting edge.

Perhaps the notion was never fully articulated. But it is very probable that those who led the charge to get the games—Mormons and non-Mormons alike—were much more interested in putting Salt Lake City on the map as something other than Mormonism's center place than they were in making the games a Mormon showcase.

Church President Gordon B. Hinckley has been quite forthcoming about the fact that the church hierarchy was divided on the issue of whether the LDS church ought to support the effort to get the Olympic bid for Salt Lake City. Soon after the announcement that the games would be held in the Utah capitol, I interviewed President Hinckley about Mormonism's current role in Salt Lake City. During that interview, I asked him what own his position had been with regard to the coming of the games. The president responded that he would not state his position, but the Olympics "are coming and we are honored." When I asked whether he thought that its being an Olympic city might undercut Salt Lake City's symbolic importance as the center of Mormonism, he said, "I am not at all worried. I am optimistic. I think the gathering here of people from all nations will be a significant thing. Salt Lake City will be on the map for those few days across the world." Continuing, he said, "Mormonism will be a part of that inevitably. . .this is the headquarters of the church and it is going to be a great thing. And it is a great opportunity for us, and we must seize that opportunity."

Our conversation moved on to other things, and I failed to ask why some of the Brethren were less than enthusiastic about the holding of the games in Utah. The fact that the Olympics might divert attention away from the church to the city and state could be one explanation why church leaders might not have fully supported the bid effort. Surely there were other reasons, including concern that the Olympics could divert the church from its primary mission, as often stated in official church literature in those days, of "perfecting the Saints, redeeming the dead [through proxy ordinances in Mormon temples], and preaching the gospel."

Some image matters might have figured into the question of whether the church should actively bolster the city's attempt to get the games. Some leaders may have had visions of using the Olympics as a platform from which to catapult public relations weapons that could destroy negative images of Mormonism. But many of the Brethren were afraid that the inevitable media atten-

tion to the state would ignite new interest in modern polygamous groups. This, the Brethren correctly feared, would serve as an unwelcome reminder of the church's practice of plural marriage in the nineteenth century. Perhaps they also worried that the coming of the games would generate renewed attention to the Mountain Meadows Massacre[8] or that such attention might lead to a call for increased scrutiny of the church's ownership of public lands and media outlets as well as its reputed fabulous wealth.

The Media's Coverage of the 2002 Olympics

The announcement in 1995 that Salt Lake City would be the site of the 2002 Winter Games was the inaugural event in the first of four distinct periods of Olympic news coverage. The first started with the announcement and moved on to early consideration of what the coming of the games would mean to Salt Lake City. The second period opened with news of a bribery scandal in which members of the Olympic committee were revealed to have been paid to vote for Salt Lake City as the 2002 site for the games. This was followed by a spate of stories about what, on the one hand, could be done to save the Games and how, on the other, to ready northern Utah for their arrival. This last would be necessary to prevent the addition of insult to injury by holding a world-renowned athletic event in a place where chaos would be ruling supreme. The third period, lasting almost 10 months, was an era of in-depth media treatment of the history and culture of the area that would be the home of the 2002 winter games. The final period began in early January 2002. It lasted through the Games and closed with analysis of three main things: the significance of the success of the games for the Olympic movement; the consequences of holding the games in the area for Salt Lake City most particularly and for Utah generally; and their implications for the future of Mormonism as a religious movement and for what its changed image would mean for Mormonism in Utah and the rest of the inter-mountain West.

Accounts of the 2002 Olympics opened with the 1995 announcement that the winter games would be held in Utah. A big story, but most of the excitement connected to the announcement was local. An international wire story published the news of Salt Lake City's triumph without significant fanfare. Although a few follow-up feature stories mentioned that the city was better known for its world-famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir than for winter sports, more of them pointed to the fact that Salt Lake City was the most urbanized site ever selected for the Winter Olympics. Aside from some early rather rudimentary coverage in the national press, however, the forthcoming games mainly made news in Salt Lake City.

The Utah capital has two daily newspapers, and their positions on many issues peripherally on directly connected to the Olympics reflected their histories. The *Deseret News*, founded in 1850 as an official organ of the Church of Jesus

8. See footnote 3 above.

Christ of Latter-day Saints, turned into a more or less standard daily newspaper in the early twentieth century. An afternoon paper until a very recent shift to morning delivery, the *News* is still owned by the church. Although the church ordinarily keeps its hands off the paper's editorial positions and its content, as the owner it could still exercise some sort of final control in overall direction of the paper and what is published in it.

Founded by Mormon dissidents in 1870, the *Salt Lake Tribune* was acquired by the family of mining magnate Thomas Kearns in 1901. This paper has always represented itself as an independent voice in the city and state, that is, independent of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Until well into the 1930s, the LDS church hierarchy and many church members regarded the *Tribune* as an anti-Mormon rag. Some still see it that way, but the newspaper situation in Salt Lake City is changing rapidly.

The mid-twentieth century saw considerable mellowing of the *Tribune's* opposition to the activities of Mormon leaders and what its earlier editors often described as the Saints' control of the city and state. If the relationship between the owners and editors of the *News* and the *Tribune* could never have been described as cordial, in the 1940s and 1950s, the hostility between the editors of the two papers was not so active as it had been in the early years of the century or as it would become in the years just prior to the announcement that the Olympics would be held in Salt Lake City. In 1952, while the two papers remained editorially and financially independent of each other, an accelerating need to cut costs led to the creation of a joint operating agreement (JOA), making it possible for the two papers to share advertising, circulation, promotion, and printing facilities.

In the 1980s, especially during the years when William Smart edited the *Deseret News*, there was a period of respite in which, although the papers remained competitors for readers and influence, a certain respect existed between the two. In the 1990s, however, the historic enmity reasserted itself, and, on both sides, competition turned to antagonism. In addition, all across the nation, innovations on the media landscape started making things difficult for afternoon papers. Although Utah's Latter-day Saints were surely aware that the *Deseret News* was the church's paper, this time-of-publication difficulty had long given the *Tribune* a great subscription advantage. As a result, the *Deseret News* considered mounting a challenge to its rival. Not long afterward, complicated financial considerations connected to ownership of the *Tribune* and the nature of the joint operating agreement turned what had been reasonable comity into enmity.[9]

This was the state of affairs on the Salt Lake newspaper scene when it was announced that Salt Lake City would be the Olympic host for the 2002 Winter

9. The ownership of the *Tribune* has now passed out of the hands of the Kearns family, changing the entire newspaper situation in Salt Lake City dramatically. But as that development occurred after the conclusion of the Olympics, it is not a part of this account of media coverage of Mormonism during the Olympic Games.

Games. One way the *Tribune* reasserted its role as the independent voice in the Mormon state was by becoming editorially skeptical about the role the LDS church had played in obtaining the Olympic bid. Initially, the *Tribune's* distrust of the actions of the church was directed to particular leaders since the early Olympic news dealt primarily with where specific sports venues would be located and who might well benefit financially. Such stories were covered in both Salt Lake papers as were ongoing stories about how traffic was being disrupted by the construction of TRAX (trolley car) lines and the expansion and upgrading of the interstate highway system.

If a review of local coverage reveals little initial difference in the way Olympic stories were covered in the city, it also reveals that this situation did not last very long. The *Tribune* exhibited editorial outrage when, at the time when traffic patterns were being altered to allow construction of the new TRAX lines, the LDS church gained permission from the City Council to buy the block of Main Street that stood between Temple Square and the remainder of the church's central Salt Lake City campus. Announcing plans to close the street in order to build a connecting plaza between Temple Square and its Joseph Smith Building, the church made it clear that the plaza would be open to the public in much the same way that public parks are open to the public.

Noting that the affirmative vote in the Council reflected the religious orientation of Council members, the *Tribune's* editors picked up on the fact that the plaza was intended as public space, but that neither tobacco nor alcohol would be allowed there. Consequently, their editorials indicated that they agreed with an appreciable number of non-Mormon citizens that the sale undercut the separation of church and the system of civil government. Although only not directly connected to the Olympics, this closing of Main Street was interpreted as an unfair effort to position the LDS church as the tourist center of a metropolis that, with an equal population of Mormons and non-Mormons, was becoming increasingly diverse.[10]

Taken up by the *Tribune*, this cause would be the first in an extended series of issues the paper with the "independent" voice would champion as the city prepared itself for the coming of the games. Because political demonstrations are more and more an integral part of any huge public activity, where such demonstrations would be allowed was another thorny issue the *Tribune* covered. Other issues were where gays and lesbians would be able to exercise their rights to public expressions of affection without facing harassment from law enforcement and what would happen to the city's homeless during February. Most espe-

10. In the time since the Olympics ended, this issue would take on all sorts of legal ramifications as citizens challenged the right of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which owned the land, to control access, thereby preventing political, social, or even religious demonstrators from entering an area that had been obtained with an understanding that it would function as public space.

cially, the *Tribune* editorialized about how Utah's restrictive liquor laws could undermine the success of the games as a great civic endeavor. This last issue never stopped being a matter of great concern to *Tribune* editors and news personnel. Perhaps that was one reason it became a staple of national news coverage of the Olympic story.

As intense media attention was directed to Utah, enduring cultural tensions between the saints and the non-Mormon inhabitants of Salt Lake City and its environs started surfacing. Although these were by no means new, they were revitalized by the appearance of the notion that the saints and their church were engaged in a conspiracy to control the games. That this might be true was clearly intimated in some of the *Tribune's* coverage, most especially that having to do with the question of where the Medals Plaza would be located. Once a decision about the Medals Plaza placement was made, *Tribune* writers agreed with many of the city's non-Mormons that the placement of the Medals Plaza was scandalous. Because it would stand in a direct visual line with the towers of the Salt Lake Mormon Temple, it could give the church unfair media advantage, especially in visual coverage.

That worry, however, did not emerge until long after the bribery scandal opened a new period of media coverage of the Olympics, one in which local reporting was put into the service of the national and international media. Stories that questioned the actions of Tom Welch, David Johnson, and other members of the Olympic Bid Committee appeared in both Salt Lake papers. But the charge that those responsible for the successful site selection decision had essentially bribed the members of the Olympic Committee to get votes was not a story that could be contained in Utah. Immediately described as reprehensible, the huge sums of money revealed to have been expended to influence votes catapulted Olympic coverage into the national and international news. The revelation made headlines in many American newspapers. From there media coverage extended in two directions. The story quickly moved overseas, as questions about what had happened when Nagano, Japan, was awarded the games became grist for the journalistic mill. It also moved onto the talk radio and cable television scene, generating interest because it was so very controversial.

What had happened was a signal embarrassment for the city and the state. But from the standpoint of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the most significant outcome of the news frenzy that followed is that—especially within the United States—the bribery story became a Salt Lake City story, not a Mormon story. Some of the men who were involved were Latter-day Saints to be sure. But they were not acting as agents for the church. Moreover, while it turned out that church-owned corporations had joined with other local business entities to support the bid financially, it was not until a week before the scandal broke that the president of the LDS church had started encouraging members to volunteer their services during the games.

Still, outside the United States, Mormonism and Salt Lake City are so completely linked in people's minds that creating distance between the church and

the scandal proved impossible. Because media people from both inside and outside the U.S. called me to ask for background information when they were working on Olympic stories, the difference in the way the scandal was perceived manifested itself to me directly. In general, reporters from outside the U.S. who talked with me before and during the games tended to be much more suspicious of the activities of the Saints than reporters from domestic media outlets. Several reporters from Europe displayed impatience when I failed to verify their hunches about the actions of church officials, and one or two of them transferred their suspicions about the church to me. They complained that I probably knew the story's "ins and outs" and made it obvious that they were troubled by my failure to indict the church for its actions in connection with the way in which the deal to get the games for Salt Lake City had been consummated.

Inside the nation, however, the bribery story by and large remained a civic scandal rather than a religious one. Accordingly, it was easier for the church to move forward with its publicity campaign without being defensive regarding how the invitation had been secured.

The third of the four distinct periods of Olympic coverage opened on February 8, 2001 with the publication in *USA Today* of a cover story that it headlined "One Year to Go." With the conspicuous exception of polygamy, this cover story (along with stories about the opening ceremonies and NBC's plans for its television coverage) made mention of virtually every issue about Mormonism that would be revisited in the media in the next 10 months. The *Minneapolis Star*-Tribune also published an account of the beginning of the year-long countdown to the games. Reminding editors that the big event was just a year away, wire stories were carried in newspapers large and small all over the country, as well as in radio roundups of the news. The *Christian Science Monitor* also looked ahead with a cover story, but theirs was not published until February 28, 2001, exactly a year before the games would come to an end.

Perhaps it was that the LDS church had the attention of media during these three weeks; perhaps it was merely coincidence, but at some point between February 8 and February 24, 2001, the Brethren who run the church decided to reiterate as strongly as they could the church's position about nomenclature. In an interview, Apostle Dallin H. Oaks told Gustav Niebuhr, then a religion reporter for the *New York Times*, that the church would be advising journalists and reminding its own members that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should not be called the "Mormon Church." Neither should it be called the "LDS Church." If, in their stories, writers needed to make a second reference, it should be to "The Church" (note upper-case letters) or "The Church of Jesus Christ." A letter to this effect from the First Presidency to the faithful was read from the stand in Sacrament Meetings throughout the church.

But those Saints who read the *Times* already knew what this letter would say because Niebuhr's story was published before its distribution. Actually Niebuhr's story included more than the First Presidency letter. It pointed to the obvious: the renewed emphasis on the full name of the church and the effort to

end the use of the "Mormon Church" nickname were directly related to the church's concern that it be understood as a Christian church. But in the stories about the First Presidency's letter that followed in the Salt Lake papers, the *Arizona Republic*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, the "but different" part of the "Christian but different" message was sometimes blurred if not entirely lost.

During the spring and summer, reasonably sound descriptions of Mormonism and the Utah scene were published in a variety of papers that are in the Dow-Jones "top 50" list. Many of these articles paid close attention to a personnel shift that would have a profound influence on the outcome of the 2002 Olympics, i.e., the appointment of Mitt Romney, a successful entrepreneur and sometime Massachusetts politician, to be president of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee.[11] Drafted—by whom is not entirely clear—to move from Boston to Salt Lake City to take this post after the bribery scandal broke, the former LDS stake president was asked to clean up the mess. Just as important: he would have to raise millions and millions of dollars while at the same time getting ready for the games.

Many give equal credit for the success of the Olympics to Romney and to the extraordinary break in a multi-year drought that produced absolutely perfect weather for the games. Surely both were important, but the former had nothing to do with the latter. What Romney did manage was to chart a course whose motto might well have been "these are NOT the "Mo-lympics." While he certainly needed all the help he could get, Romney avoided taking too much help from the LDS church, something that might have made it appear that the Brethren were the ones who were really making all the key decisions. Certainly he was aware that other monies would probably dry up if it looked as if the Olympics were a Mormon project.

This explains why the SLOC president was especially bothered by stories in the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Boston Globe* that addressed the question of whether the games would be the "Mo-lympics." Romney told every reporter who interviewed him—and there must have been hundreds—that the forthcoming celebration *cum* athletic contest could in no way be described as the Mormon games.

As the opening came closer, church spokespeople echoed Romney's declaration. President Hinckley said that while the church was willing to assist, it would only do so "upon request." Reiterated time and time again, this willingness to help, but only if asked formulation probably helped to convince influential reporters that the "Mo-lympics" charge was unfounded.

Besides newspaper accounts, the dual story of Mormonism and the Olympic Games was also reported in-depth in cover stories in *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek*. Both were competent and useful, but Kenneth L. Woodward's *Newsweek* article was particularly significant because Woodward made

11. In 1994 Romney opposed Teddy Kennedy in the race for the U.S. Senate. In 2002, he made a successful bid for the Massachusetts governorship.

an effort to represent the LDS belief system as fully and fairly as is possible in a news magazine. While the LDS Public Affairs rapid response mechanism was brought into play to correct some minor inaccuracies in the *Newsweek* story, the author made a real effort to explain where Mormonism and traditional Christianity differ. In fact, of everything that had been published about the Latter-day Saints in connection with the Olympics, Woodward's story—along with a story published in *The Economist* after the games opened—came closest to fully characterizing the "but different" part of the church's own claim to be Christian but also dramatically different from all other forms of Christianity.

Meanwhile, for all its length, a substantial story in the *New Yorker* did not come to grips with this matter of how the Mormon faith might, at the same time, be both Christian and different. Instead Lawrence Wright wrote an account in which today's Latter-day Saints appear caught in such an intellectual and spiritual time warp that Mormonism is not merely different, but entirely other.

For the record, we should note that many see Lawrence Wright's *New Yorker* story as the biggest missed media opportunity in the entire saga of Olympic coverage. Others regard it as a media coup that failed. Actually, it was both. To wit: In making plans to get the Mormon story out, a member of the staff of Edelman Public Relations in New York City, a firm that has a continuing contractual relationship with the LDS church, had the idea of approaching the *New Yorker* and suggesting a profile of President Hinckley. (In view of his interviews with Mike Wallace and Larry King, Hinckley had become something of a media personality.) This idea was approved; the project was "sold" to the *New Yorker*, and the story was assigned to Wright.

He took the assignment very seriously, reading practically everything about Mormonism that he could get his hands on. He spent almost an entire month in Utah doing interviews, expanding his focus from the church president and contemporary Mormonism to the history of the faith tradition and the peculiar culture that it had spawned.

Unfortunately for an article about the Latter-day Saints intended as a lead-in to the Olympics, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers altered the *New Yorker's* publication schedule. Because anything about the attack and its aftermath became high priority, Wright's piece was put on hold. It was not published until January 21, 2002. Moreover, before its publication, the editors so reduced the space available that the piece had to be cut almost by half. This reduction in length makes it hard to assess what long-standing impression the article might have had on the Mormon image if it had been published in its uncut form.

Of greater significance in assessing the effect this article might have had on the way people view the Saints was the altered schedule. By the time Wright's article appeared, the Olympic torch was already on its way to Salt Lake City. Wright started his story with the Mountain Meadows Massacre, but readers were far more interested in what the opening ceremonies would be like and more curious about the city's preparations to entertain the world than about any impact the history of that horrible episode might have had on the Mormon psy-

che. In addition, Wright emphasized the polygamy story. But many previously published articles had pointed out that polygamy is such an abomination to the contemporary church that any member found involved in plural marriage is excommunicated. As a consequence, Wright's lengthy focus on polygamy read like something from the 1970s or 1980s, rather than a new and intriguingly original piece of writing.

In the final phase of Olympic coverage, the period lasting from the beginning of 2002 till mid-summer of that year, the Mormons were pushed aside by all the attention that journalists paid to the pairs skating controversy and, in general, to athletic contests. Background articles all over the country (and indeed the world) continued to be published, but they did not deal so much with the story elements that had filled the news in the year leading up to the opening of the games. Instead, the news about the Latter-day Saints was that the Mormons were not news. Their low profile, their refusal to mount a proselytizing crusade, and their willingness even to laugh at themselves generated articles that were surely interesting to long-time observers of the Mormon scene, pieces that Latter-day Saints must have found it a pleasure to read.

All the journalists who went to Utah expecting an insular and repressive culture found instead a reasonably ordinary American cultural scene that was made more engaging because of the celebratory milieu, the perfect weather for winter games, and incredible mountain scenery. Curiously, almost no major journalist appears to have written at any length about the church's multi-media extravaganza that was presented in the astonishing, brand new Conference Center. They focused instead on everyday encounters with friendly and helpful members of the church.

Not much notice was given to Mo-lympic talk and discussions of a Mormon conspiracy to take over the games. Few reporters wrote stories that dwelt on either the 19th century history of polygamy or the new polygamy. Almost none of the stories filed from the Olympic site discussed the matter of whether extra wives could be found behind every closet door in Salt Lake City. And not many accounts included descriptions of people who did not drink and, therefore, did not know how to have fun. A few over the top stories were published like the one in the *London Daily Mail* that ran under the headline "Sex, God, and Skis: Welcome to Polygamy City." But rarely did articles that departed from the general positive pattern get published. One exception was a Woody Paige column in the *Denver Post*. This one was so outrageous in its screed against the way Jell-O-eating Salt Lake City had "royally screwed up the Olympics" that the negative reaction led him to write a second column, this time apologizing to Mormons, to Utahans, and to anyone else he had angered with a "satire that did not work."

What seems to have occurred is that the media culture that rapidly developed in Salt Lake City started to police itself with regard to stories about the Latter-day Saints. Offensive articles were so obviously out of line that their very negativity backfired. Surely they did less damage to the Mormon image than had nineteenth-century and twentieth-century writings whose authors were de-

termined to pen exposés that would tell the world the "truth about Mormonism."

Looking back, it is obvious that many of the timeworn stereotypes of Latter-day Saints have been decisively revised. Readers of newspapers, radio listeners, television viewers, and internet users who carried Mormon stereotypes about in their heads will likely have very different ideas about Mormons and Mormonism.[12] For the LDS church, this was surely a positive outcome of the holding of the games in Utah.

Because this article deals with media presentations of the Saints and their impact on changing patterns of understanding the Mormons outside the culture, this is not the place for a careful and detailed assessment of how the Olympics might have changed Utah's economy. But since surface perceptions are important in the success of the tourist industry, this is the place to inform readers not familiar with post-Olympic Salt Lake City that improvements in inter- and intra-city transportation, the presence in Salt Lake City of new and/or improved hotels and the flourishing of a lively restaurant and entertainment scene, as well as enhancements to skiing establishments are likely to help attract paying visitors to the state.

Perceptions are likewise critical to cultural change. In light of this, an underlying question of greater significance comes into view. Did the holding of the Olympics in Mormonism's center place have much long-lived effect on the culture of Salt Lake City and the state of Utah?

As the Olympic feeling has finally dissipated, some signals, perhaps most especially the plaza dispute, suggest that not much has changed in the culture of Salt Lake City and Utah. Possibly tensions were exacerbated because, however positive was the national and international coverage of the Saints, the shining of the media spotlight on Mormonland revealed deep cultural stresses and strains. Except for the challenge mounted to Mormonism by the Baptist contingent and a few other Protestant groups, the Olympics appear to have smoothed over the stresses and strains temporarily. But whether the initiative jointly undertaken by Mayor Rocky Anderson—who was reared as a Mormon but no longer considers himself one—and Mormon industrialist John Huntsman to create an "Alliance for Unity" that will bring LDS leaders together with leaders of the non-Mormon

12. It is interesting to note that a renewed assault on the positive Mormon image is currently developing around the Mountain Meadow Massacre and the reprehensible behavior of some modern polygamists. Mounted not by the members of the conservative wing of Protestantism who were responsible for the "Mormonism is not Christian" campaign, but by investigative journalists and other professional writers, it focuses on violence. By indicting Brigham Young and other church leaders for the horrible massacre at Mountain Meadows and other violent acts, much of this recently published work once again calls the notion that Mormonism is benign into question.

The surprising magnitude of the bibliography of such materials is shown in the June 2003 issue of *Benchmark Book News*. It lists 18 works (three of them reprints), ten of which have been published since the Olympic Games ended.

community will bear enough fruit to "to start healing the wounds of the state" remains to be seen.[13]

Now that the games are finished and Olympic euphoria is a thing of the past, will such efforts to heal long-standing cultural wounds go forward? A 25 February 2002 story in the *New York Times* was headed, "Utah's Changes May Be as Fleeting as Olympic Glory." The story dealt mainly with the economy, but its headline is an important warning. All sorts of cultural and religious stresses and strains made their way to the surface as the Olympics approached. If these are once again buried, things in Salt Lake City and the state of Utah will not have changed in any fundamental way. But if, having been brought to the surface, relationships are re-negotiated, the city that sits on the edge of the Great Salt Lake could be more than just a place for tourists to visit that now has better facilities than it had before the Olympics. The city could also be a better place to live for neighbors of every religious persuasion. If that happens, the 2002 Olympics will, in fact, have been the occasion for something far more significant than an alteration in Mormon stereotypes.

13. Trying to bridge the divide, in a conference address President Hinckley warned the Saints not to adopt "holier than thou" attitudes, and other LDS leaders encouraged church members to stop calling the members of other faith groups non-Mormons, thereby defining by negation rather than affirmation. During the same general conference, Apostle Dallin Oaks weighed in, saying that "neighbors" was the term he endorsed.