"Rising above Principle": Ezra Taft Benson as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, 1953–61, Part 1

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What a strange game is politics. —Ezra Taft Benson[1]

I

Contemplating the 1952 U.S. general elections, David O. McKay, lifelong Republican and president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, eagerly anticipated a Republican sweep. At the news of Dwight D. Eisenhower's decisive win as the thirty-fourth American president, McKay was elated. "In my opinion," the venerable seventy-eight-year-old Church leader recorded, "it is the greatest thing that has happened in a hundred years for our country."[2] The next day, he wrote in a letter to the president-elect, "Your being placed at the head of the United States Government at the time of the present crises in our history . . . is a manifestation of Providential watchfulness over the destiny of this land of America. . . . I pray that Divine guidance may be yours continually as you assume the responsibility of directing the destiny not only of the United States of America but of the entire world."[3]

McKay's faith in the sixty-two-year-old retired five-star U.S. Army general was cemented two weeks later when he learned that Eisenhower wanted to appoint a member of the Church's second-tier Quorum of the

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Twelve Apostles as his new Secretary of Agriculture. The LDS prophet knew that the invitation represented an unprecedented honor in Mormon history and a new phase in the acceptance of the million-member church into mainstream American society. He also realized that the appointment would require that he take the extraordinary step of granting the churchman a leave of absence from his full-time ecclesiastical duties.[4]

Arriving home from his office on November 20, 1952, McKay answered a long-distance call from Arthur V. Watkins, Utah's two-term Republican senator. If Ezra Taft Benson, fifty-three years old and serving as an apostle since 1943, were offered a position in Eisenhower's cabinet, would he be allowed to accept? Yes, McKay quickly replied.[5] Only moments earlier, Benson himself had told Watkins: "I'd be glad to try anything President McKay asks me to do."[6] The next morning, Benson ran into McKay as the two men arrived for work at the LDS Church Administration Building in downtown Salt Lake City. "Brother Benson," McKay said, "my mind is clear in the matter. If the opportunity comes in the proper spirit I think you should accept." "I can't believe that it will come," Benson replied. "I've never even *seen* Eisenhower, much less met him or spoken with him." (Both men had originally supported Ohio Senator Robert Taft as their party's 1952 presidential candidate.)[7]

The following day, Benson and a colleague were forty miles south in Provo, preparing to help divide a local LDS stake. While browsing in a downtown clothing store for a suit to fit his six-foot-one-inch tall, 220-pound frame, Benson was told that his wife, Flora, was on the telephone. Eisenhower's office was trying to reach him, she said. "There's really something to it," Benson told himself moments later, concluding "to get off by myself for a while" to "quietly consider a course of action." He drove to the campus of nearby Brigham Young University, where he soon located a vacant office and knelt in prayer. Afterwards, he telephoned McKay, who again stressed that he should "accept if it was a clear offer."[8] For the devout Benson, McKay's counsel was received not simply as friendly advice but as heavenly inspiration.

When Benson finally returned the call, he reached Milton Eisenhower, whom Benson had known when the younger Eisenhower worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1930s and who now served as his brother's advisor. Could Benson fly to New York City to meet the President-elect at 2:00 P.M. on Monday, the 24th? Benson said he would be there, then immediately notified McKay, who urged that he leave the

same evening. After meetings, Benson rushed home and caught a plane east departing a little after midnight. Arriving in New York City less than twelve hours later, he spent the rest of the day in his hotel room nursing a new cold.[9]

Meeting first with Milton Eisenhower, Benson learned he was the sole candidate for the cabinet post and that his nomination had been urged personally by Senator Taft and others.[10] Though the outreach to Taft was an expression of political reconciliation, Milton Eisenhower's role in Benson's appointment was presumably the decisive recommendation.[11] The morning's newspapers had already announced Benson's nomination—in Salt Lake City, McKay's pleasure appeared in print that afternoon[12]—so Eisenhower's announcement probably did not come as a complete surprise. Though he worried he might be "expected to rubber-stamp programs" he did not agree with, Benson had already decided: "I would have a rare opportunity to fight effectively for my beliefs as an American." When eventually introduced to President-elect Eisenhower, Benson, much relieved, remembered "lik[ing] him immediately."[13]

Benson began by noting his initial support of Taft and belief that the country would probably be better served by a civilian president. He then cited the need for increased research and more effective marketing of American agricultural products, together with minimal-to-no federal involvement in the actual business of farming: "Farmers should be permitted to make their own decisions . . . with a minimum of government interference." "You'll never be asked to support a program you don't believe in," Eisenhower promised. What about the compatibility of his calling as a Church leader, Benson also wondered.[14] "We have the great responsibility to restore the confidence of our people in their own government," Eisenhower said. "That means we've got to deal with spiritual matters."[15] He then pointed out that he had earlier met David O. McKay, and felt certain McKay would support Benson's appointment.[16] "I didn't want to be President, frankly, when the pressure started," Eisenhower admitted. "*But you can't refuse to serve America.*" McKay's conditions having been met, Benson realized he had no other option but to accept.[17] If Eisenhower wanted him, Benson said, he would "serve for not less than two years—if he wanted me that long."[18] "No true American would refuse a call . . . to serve our country," Benson later commented publicly. "I shall do my best, God being my helper."[19]

II

For the strait-laced, strong-willed Ezra Taft Benson (born August 4, 1899), the call to national service was an unmistakable manifestation of "God's will."[20] Four days later, on November 28, McKay, aided by Second Counselor J. Reuben Clark, placed his hands on the apostle's head and set him apart—a ritual usually reserved for Church callings—as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.[21] "You will have a responsibility, even greater than your associates in the cabinet," McKay prayed,

> because you go . . . as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are entitled to inspiration from on high, and if you so live and think and pray, you will have that divine guidance which others may not have. . . . We bless you, therefore, dear Brother Ezra, that when questions of right and wrong come before the men with whom you are deliberating, you may see clearly what is right, and knowing it, that you may have courage to stand by that which is right and proper. . . . We seal upon you the blessings of . . . sound judgment, clear vision, that you might see afar the needs of this country; vision that you might see, too, the enemies who would thwart the freedom of the individual as vouchsafed by the Constitution, . . . and may you be fearless in the condemnation of these subversive influences, and strong in your defense of the rights and privileges of the Constitution.[22]

However stunned, Benson believed firmly that God's hand had guided him toward his new "calling." He had graduated with honors from BYU in 1926, then earned a master's degree from Iowa State College (Ames) the next year. On September 10, 1926, he had married Flora Amussen, daughter of a well-to-do jeweler and Danish convert in Logan, and the first of their six children was born January 2, 1928, in Salt Lake City. In 1927, they relocated to the small farm in southern Idaho which he and his brother, Orval, had purchased several years earlier. Some eighteen months later, Benson began working full time as a countywide agriculture agent, helping farmers to improve stocks, rotate crops, and organize farm-oriented cooperatives. Soon he was employed by the University of Idaho (Boise) as an extension economist and marketing specialist. In 1933, he helped to organize the Idaho Co-operative Council and became its first secretary, a position he held for the next five years. During this period, he took a leave of absence to enroll in additional graduate classes at the University of California in Berkeley. In 1938, after consulting with the Church's First Presidency (then consisting of Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay) and with Flora, Benson agreed to become executive secretary of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, head-

quartered in Washington, D.C. The council represented more than 2 million American farmers and 5,000 farming cooperatives. "I love the co-operative movement," he explained, "I believe in it. It squares with my philosophy of life, my religious philosophy."[23] When, in 1943, he was invited to join another large cooperative association at nearly double his $25,000-a-year salary,[24] Benson again sought the advice of Church officials. Informed instead that he was being called to join the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (at an annual salary of $6,000),[25] Benson quickly resigned his job and soon relocated his young family to Utah.

For the next nine years, he devoted himself full time to the challenging duties facing Christ's newest latter-day emissary. Benson routinely visited the Church's stakes and missions, offering advice, nurturing faith, and superintending LDS growth. He also made certain, as instructed by Church leaders, to continue his support of farming and cooperation, regularly combining both interests at home and during his Church tours away from Salt Lake City.[26] In fact, in addition to his Church assignments, he served as vice-president, trustee, member of the executive committee, and chair of the American Institute of Cooperation (founded in 1925 and composed of 1,500 farmer cooperatives).[27] Because of his "celebrity status," Benson received more non-ecclesiastical speaking invitations during these years than most other LDS officers,[28] and Church leaders evidently valued the worldly cachet of Benson's secular activities.

For Benson, the cooperative movement tapped the very best of human nature, blending in mutually beneficial ways the principles of freedom and self-reliance that he believed found their fullest expression in American capitalism. Benson was convinced that God's direct intervention was evident not only in the founding of the United States as a democratic Christian republic,[29] but in the development of a self-regulating economy based on hard work, individual responsibility, and private ownership. Terming himself a "libertarian," "constitutionalist," and "conservative conservative,"[30] Benson believed that the divine "truths" of the LDS gospel, American Constitutional government, and Western capitalism were intimately intertwined.[31] "A sound agriculture is vital to the national economy," he told Church members in 1945. "Let us not be inclined to run to a paternalistic government for help when every problem arises, but let us attack our problems jointly, and through effective, cooperative effort, solve our problems at home."[32] Benson also subscribed to the anti-Communist rhetoric that marked much of American political discourse during these years. Commu-

nism, he said in 1947, "is a total philosophy of life, atheistic and utterly opposed to all we hold dear."[33] "I'd rather be dead," he insisted, "than lose my liberty."[34] "He is a man," a non-Mormon observer commented, "whose religion elevates the economic interests of propertied men to the level of universal moral principle."[35]

Benson was nothing if not a man of deep-seated, seemingly dogmatic conviction.[36] "My faith is the dominant force in my life," he wrote in 1962.[37] In enunciating that faith, Benson was uncompromising: "These truths will, if you are wise, take precedence in your lives 'over all contrary theories, dogmas, hypotheses or relative-truths [from whatever source] or by whomsoever advocated.'"[38] His belief in the human ability to access God's will circumscribed his behavior, determined his values, and governed his roles as husband, father, and leader.[39] "He deeply believed his commitment to serve his country could only be fulfilled," two of his biographers commented, "by making his actions accountable to God."[40]

At the same time, Benson's cherished convictions also sometimes engendered a rigidness of thought and action—"unrelenting righteousness" both "blunt and unyielding," in the words of two other commentators[41]—that did not always best serve life's complexities. Benson himself described this characteristic as "resolute resistance."[42] "I had this bad habit—I guess you call it bad," he explained, "of laying things on the line economically just as hard and cold as I could based on the facts, so they'd register with people, and not giving them a lot of soft soap, try and build up good will immediately."[43] Following a sermon that he sensed might be controversial, he confided to his diary in April 1952: "If I come in for criticism so be it, I spoke only of principles vital to the future of this nation."[44] For Benson, government involvement in the lives of citizens was justified only when it could be undertaken more efficiently than state, local, or private intervention; and when its effect on the "morale and character of the people," including "our free institution[s], our local government, the home, the school, the church and our other institutions" was demonstrably positive.[45] Generating more controversy than any other member of Eisenhower's cabinet,[46] Benson was predisposed by temperament and experience to ask "advice from no mortal person," an early assistant remembered. "[H]e felt he had supernatural powers."[47]

From the beginning of his tenure, Benson insisted that he had not sought the secretaryship. "I can't imagine anyone in his right mind wanting it," he told BYU students on December 1, 1952, a week after his meet-

ing with Eisenhower. "Because I know something of what it entails; I know something of the crossfires, the pressures, the problems, the difficulties."[48] Yet in accepting the prestigious assignment, Benson was motivated as much by godly patriotic obligation as by religiously fueled secular ambition. He had pursued a path, both before his calling as an apostle and afterwards, that had propelled him to the forefront of the American agricultural industry. "I knew that I was well known and favorably known," he later admitted.[49] In fact, when Thomas E. Dewey ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. presidency in 1948, Benson had been approached about a possible cabinet position—also Secretary of Agriculture.[50] Eisenhower's invitation may have come as a shock, but it was neither wholly unexpected nor entirely unwanted.[51]

III

A man reinvigorated, Benson moved decisively into his new $22,500-a-year Cabinet position (later $25,000),[52] not waiting for nomination hearings or official swearing in. He arranged to have his Church assignments shifted to other apostles, easily cleared the FBI's background investigation,[53] began "prayerfully" gathering a coterie of like-minded associates—some of whom were LDS[54]—and embarked on a whirlwind cross-country tour to assess the needs of America's farmers.[55] Two of his first employees, both age thirty-six and nearly twenty years Benson's junior, were Frederick W. Babbel, Benson's traveling companion during a 1946 LDS relief mission to post-war Europe,[56] and D. Arthur Haycock, former secretary to LDS Church President George Albert Smith. Haycock became Benson's personal secretary, Babbel his administrative assistant.[57] "My husband realizes his limitations," Benson's wife subsequently commented, "and so in his work it is always his desire to surround himself with the very best of counselors."[58]

Babbel later recalled of Benson's invitation: "That night . . . I . . . prayed just as sincerely as I knew how to pray. I told my Heavenly Father that I needed to know definitely. I was not reluctant to go if He was willing to have me do so. The answer came through as clearly as any answer I've received in life—and I've received hundreds of them—'If he wants you, go.' I thanked Him. Then I picked up the telephone and I said to my wife, 'I got the answer; we're leaving.'"[59] One of Benson's first non-LDS appointees, Don Paarlberg, added: "He asked me whether I liked my [current] job . . ., which I said I did. He asked me whether I was happily married. I told him

I was. He asked me whether I was active in church affairs, and I told him I was. Then as I was about to leave, he asked me if I could come on his staff and serve as his economic advisor. I said I wanted some time to think about this. He said, 'Fine, let me know in about two days.'"[60]

Having suggested that the new cabinet's pre-inaugural first meeting begin with prayer, Benson was overjoyed when Eisenhower invited him on January 12, 1953, to offer the invocation. For Benson, "beseeching the Lord for spiritual strength was as necessary . . . as eating or sleeping."[61] "We are deeply grateful for this glorious land in which we live," he paraphrased LDS scripture. "We know it is a land choice above all others, the greatest under Heaven. . . . We thank Thee for the glorious Constitution of this land which has been established by noble men who Thou didst raise unto this very purpose. . . . Help us ever, we pray Thee, to be true and faithful to these great and guiding principles."[62]

The next week, however, Benson was "deeply disappointed" when Eisenhower chose not to begin the cabinet's meeting again with prayer. Had he done something wrong, Benson wondered. That evening, he "broke down and wept aloud" in his small apartment. Five days later, he summoned his courage and sent Eisenhower a letter urging that all cabinet meetings thereafter "be opened with a word of prayer." Eisenhower did not act immediately, looking instead for a practice that would be acceptable to everyone. Then, on the second Friday morning cabinet meeting after Benson's letter, Eisenhower announced that, barring any objections, he would like to start with a moment of silence. "And that's the way it was . . . from that time on," Benson wrote.[63] (Benson made certain that his own departmental staff meetings always began with a vocal invocation—a "custom," he termed it.)[64]

One of Benson's first priorities was taming a massive $730 million federal bureaucracy. Even before assuming office, he began to reorganize his department's twenty agencies, and 8,000 Washington-based employees, into four main divisions. (This also reduced the number of agency heads participating in weekly staff meetings.) Some agencies were combined; some transferred to other departments; and some eliminated. The goal was to reorient Agriculture away from what Benson viewed as interventionist-driven farm policies and toward the department's real mission: improved marketing and better commodity-related education and research. He was convinced "he had to alter the ideological temper of his department and acquire some measure of direction over its vast opera-

tions."[65] "A new administration must be able to choose enough players for its team," he explained; "otherwise, it cannot give the electorate the type of government they voted for."[66]

Collectively, Benson's upper-level appointees "inclined toward a conservative brand of economics and only a few had any practical experience in politics."[67] As expected, Benson's desire to surround himself with similarly oriented undersecretaries and assistants was seen as a purge by some long-term department staff—notably those whose own employment had begun during the previous twenty years of Democratic leadership—as well as by some Republicans looking to reward party faithful. Benson, "unaware of senatorial prerogatives and unmindful of partisan demands," was strictly concerned with "merit and department needs."[68] His refusal—at least, initially—to accommodate patronage prompted one Republican senator to complain privately of Benson's "lack of political savvy." Others pointed more generously to "political inexperience, and possibly bad advice from disloyal subordinates."[69]

Benson tried not to terminate outright the employment of anyone whose services he no longer desired—especially high-profile appointments—preferring instead to arrange for lateral reassignments. But the transition was not always smooth.[70] Fred Babbel, whose personnel-related duties earned him the "lovable" nickname "Hatchet Man," recalled: "Secretary Benson asked me under no circumstances to ever deprive a person of his job or his livelihood without first making an effort to have them placed in another job that would be equal if not better in terms of income and fundamental responsibilities. . . . As far as I know, I never moved a single person without being sure that he had an equal if not better job in terms of livelihood."[71]

While Benson favored close past associates—which included LDS Church members—for senior advisory and administrative positions,[72] he also sometimes acted, according to Babbel, as if membership in the Church were a detriment: "He leaned over backwards not to show them any kind of favoritism or special privilege. He did not want to feel beholden to them in any respect, and this caused some people to wonder because he seemed actually to discriminate against those of his own faith rather than favoring them in positions of the department."[73]

"He regard[ed] his ecclesiastical responsibilities [as being] of such an important nature," Babbel continued,

> that he wouldn't want to ever have to compromise even in the least, under

> any circumstances, because of friendship or anything else [regarding] that relationship. So he [could] be very friendly to those who [weren't] close to him, but to the people who work[ed] directly with him he [was] very, very businesslike. . . . [T]his caused him to be a little overly severe in his normal desired relationships with his own people because he didn't want to establish a relationship that would make them feel that they could w[h]eedle in and ask for special responsibilities or special favors or something like that.[74]

In conjunction with the reorganization and new hirings, Benson's office also issued a memorandum regarding his expectations of all department employees. The generally benign statement read, in part: "The people of this country have a right to expect that everyone of us will give a full day's work for a day's pay."[75] This one sentence was immediately interpreted by some as proof that Benson believed "the Department was filled with loafers and that we were going to crack down on them."[76] Benson insisted that the statement was not intended as criticism (and later commented on having to learn that "every word needs to be twice weighed").[77] But the damage had been done, the incident giving rise to the belief that Benson was focused on perception, not on people. Babbel remembered:

> His first press secretary . . . wrote out the first press release from the department in which he quoted Secretary Benson as having said, among other things, "I expect an honest day's work for an honest day's pay." And the press immediately picked this allegation up as being [from] a man who was critical and caustic of the people who were working in agriculture and that he was chastising them or trying to put them in line . . . Secretary Benson . . . was embarrassed that it was put out under his name as an official thing that had been done, and, in a sense, so far as his effectiveness in the department with the regular line employees who really didn't know him as a person, he lost his battle the first day.[78]

To demonstrate the secretary's warmth, Babbel thought that Benson should personally shake the hand of every employee at least once. Benson agreed. However, when others urged that Benson ask employees to come to work early to meet him, Babbel protested that this would create more problems. Babbel's fears proved true; and when the feeling among some employees became "more bitter than ever because . . . here again was evidence of a man that you had to do his bidding," the plan was dropped. Though Benson had been able to meet about a third of his employees, the experience "left an indelible mark on the people," Babbel noted.

> There had been sufficient damage done that there were nice little ways in

> which they could divert this or undercut this and cause things to happen in a way that did not always reflect to his credit. . . . He still felt that if people could really get to know him that he could somehow ride over it, but, through the years, there were many things said perhaps in the department or leaked from the department that would tend to try and build up a wrong kind of picture of the man.[79] . . . [I]f they had gotten to really know the man, they would have found that he was probably one of the greatest Americans who has ever lived.[80]

Benson usually arose by 5:00 A.M. each day, devoted an hour or more to prayer, meditation, and memo-dictating (sometimes referred to by department employees as "epistles from the Apostle"), and was in his office by 7:30 or 8:00 A.M. At first, he tended to put in fifteen- to sixteen-hour days, six days a week.[81] Often he could be found praying. "For the Benson machine," *Time* magazine reported, "prayer is the basic fuel." "He spends as much time on his knees as he does on his feet," one associate observed. Benson also removed all ash trays from his and adjacent offices—or converted them into containers for paper clips and other small objects—and by his example discouraged smoking in departmental meetings.[82] And he tried not to be photographed holding any glass that looked as if it might contain alcohol.[83] In addition, he made certain that the temperature in his office almost never exceeded 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Babbel explained: "When people came in there if it was a warm room they would just relax and be comfortable. If it was cool, they tended to want to get their business over with and get out. And he enjoyed a cooler room anyhow. He had made this a practice in his life to keep his room slightly on the cool side so people would be more interested in trying to get their business over with and move out."[84]

Benson also posted two small signs in his office. One, a quotation attributed to Abraham Lincoln, read, according to Babbel: "I will never do that which I feel to be wrong even though it may be a means of helping me achieve that which I feel to be right."[85] The other, and better known, was attached to the marble base of a pen set usually "in full view of all who stood before his desk": "O God give us men with a mandate higher than the ballot box."[86] The mottoes served as constant reminders of Benson's guiding philosophy and as gentle warnings of what guests could expect—a commitment to principles over politics.

Benson learned over time to build support for the implementation of new policies, thereby endowing his views with the weight of consensus. J. Earl Coke, one of his non-LDS assistants, later asserted, with some frus-

tration, that while he agreed with Benson's "fundamental philosophy," Benson did not always use staff counsel in seeking advice for those departments for which Coke was responsible.[87] Babbel, in contrast, remembered that Benson sometimes could be too collaborative:

> I believe at first he found it rather difficult to make decisions. He was so anxious to make the right decision in every case. He is a man of very high principle and he felt that every decision should be based on principle and not on expedience in any way. So, he arranged to have advisory groups in every one of the commodity areas. . . . When they would come up with [a] final answer, which was acceptable to him, he would usually phrase his decision on the basis that, I have brought together the best men I could in this area; it has been their judgment that we should move in this direction. I endorse what they have said and we will move in this direction. But it frequently seemed to many people to be a way of trying to avoid making a direct decision on his own. . . . Undoubtedly, there were some decisions made which were, perhaps, not popular and there may have been some that were made that were in error. This will always happen regardless of who you are if you make decisions.[88]

Benson also made certain to try to commemorate privately the weekly meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve back in Salt Lake City. Babbel reported:

> Secretary Benson always made it a practice, which he continued throughout his eight years, that since these men would always use Thursdays as a fast day, a day on which they went without their meals until after they had had their meeting, he too not only observed the fast on Thursdays, but he would always, wherever he was, when the ten o'clock rolled around out in Salt Lake—which would be twelve o'clock here—he would always arrange to have on his schedule fifteen or twenty minutes when he could go into the room by himself and kneel in prayer and join his feelings with the people who were making decisions that affect the Church. He did this wherever he was, on travels, on trips, wherever it was.[89]

"The thing that used to amaze me about the Secretary," Babbel summarized,

> was that his average load, daily load, of decisions that had to be made—program and policy decisions—ran close to 100 a day that had to go out under his signature. Yet he was traveling between 300,000 to 450,000 miles a year all over the world. . . . Oftentimes he was not in the department for two weeks at a time, and by the time he would come back he would have handled anywhere from 200 to 1,000 decisions. We had to try and brief him someway so he would know what he [we] had done in his absence. . . . And it taught me one thing: that people at the high administration levels

> with this kind of problem facing them in terms just of the sheer number of decisions that they have to make each day and for which they are responsible without even knowing what they have decided, puts them in a very, very bad light.[90]

"In most Cabinet posts, and especially in agriculture," Benson echoed, "few decisions are made with adequate time for reflection, for checking [with] all interested and responsible parties. You do what you can, what there is time for. But it's a steady round of decisions and emergencies; emergencies and decisions."[91]

IV

When hearings regarding Benson's nomination began in mid-January 1953, some senators wanted to know if he anticipated any major revision of existing U.S. farm policy. Benson's supporters had already been quoted publicly as saying that he would seek "a return to a free market, with gradual discontinuance of high support programs"; and Benson himself had asserted: "I don't think any real American wants to be subsidized."[92] But Benson also knew that, during the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower had insisted that price supports—specifically 90 percent of parity for six basic commodities (corn, cotton, peanuts, rice, tobacco, and wheat)—would remain unchanged through 1954. To have suggested otherwise would have been to "court disaster."[93] Though Benson believed Eisenhower's promise had been a "mistake,"[94] he agreed to abide by the president's pledge. As for adjustments after 1954, he declined "to be drawn into specific commitments about what I would do or recommend in hypothetical situations."[95] (Benson already knew what he wanted to achieve and did not want the disclosure to cloud his appointment.) Six days later, on January 21, 1953, Benson was officially installed as the fifteenth U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.[96]

Benson inherited a federal farm policy that had, over the past two decades, been crafted to achieve greater price stability for America's farmers "by limiting . . . the flow of products onto the market."[97] In practical terms, the government's attempts to control production, including price supports and other programs (such as acreage allotments), had become "tantamount to a form of national management for agriculture."[98] During the early 1930s, the federal government had restricted production; by the decade's end, it had encouraged over-production. Consumer demand had peaked—with prices and income rising dramatically—during World War II and the Korean War. However, by the time Benson took office, de-

clining prices resulting from the previous decade's over-production had reached "statutory levels of price support,"[99] and Benson was legally required to enforce the now artificially high prices, which he and others believed functioned primarily to subsidize farming inefficiencies.

The prices the federal government paid for farm products reflected a balance between the prices farmers received for their goods and the prices they paid to purchase goods.[100] "Parity" was the "balance" price that originally prevailed for farmers during the early 1910s. "The price of wheat, for example," Benson explained, "would be 100 per cent of parity when the selling price of a bushel of wheat would buy as much of other goods as it did in 1910–14."[101] "In 1914," a wheat farmer illustrated, "I could take a bushel of wheat to town, sell it, and use the proceeds to buy a good shirt. I figure I should be able to buy the same shirt for a bushel of wheat today."[102] Over the years, the government's purchasing programs had resulted in the stockpiling of huge amounts of agricultural products—worth some $1.3 billion in 1952.[103] These growing reserves were then stored (possibly indefinitely), sold at a loss (because of the artificially high prices paid), or destroyed (when no longer consumable). If warehoused, they required ever larger storage facilities and the paying of ever-increasing rents and other fees—$1 billion annually in 1952.[104] The result was a government-subsidized cycle of over-production, often by marginal farmers—numbering an estimated 1.5 million[105]—who greeted any change in supports as a tangible threat to an already precarious way of life.

Shortly after taking office, Benson oversaw the distribution of a 1,200-word official "General Statement" on farming. As much a personal testimony of the "eternal principle" of freedom as a secular pronouncement of U.S. policy,[106] the declaration was "influenced to some extent," Benson explained, "by an *old-fashioned philosophy* that it is impossible to help people permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves. It is a philosophy that believes in the supreme worth of the individual as a free man, as a child of God, that believes in the dignity of labor and the conviction that you cannot build character by taking away man's initiative and independence."[107]

Benson's blunt statement put America's farmers on notice that government supports were intended as temporary mechanisms to help protect and stabilize free markets, and not as permanent relief or subsidies. Federal programs should aim "to obtain in the market place full parity prices of farm products and parity incomes for farm people so that farm-

ers will have freedom to operate efficiently and to adjust their production to changing consumer demands in an expanding economy."[108] For Benson, "Any infringement upon personal liberty . . . would in the long run stifle initiative, destroy character, and demoralize the people."[109] Toward that goal, Benson proclaimed, the Department of Agriculture would henceforth support expanded research and education programs; emphasize domestic and foreign markets; and—most controversially—push for the elimination of all federal subsidies. Directly impacted were small family farms—the very institutions Benson himself believed formed the "backbone" of American agriculture and "bulwark of our free way of life."[110] The political value of small family farms was greater than their steadily decreasing numbers indicated;[111] and ironically, given his own advocacy-driven experiences in Idaho farming, Benson now found himself having "to play the role of the hard-hearted administrator seeking the welfare of all agriculture."[112]

In his first public speech as secretary, Benson continued his warning cry. To cattlemen facing falling prices, he announced in February 1953 that they should no longer expect to rely on government help, insisting that he "would not be stampeded into any unwise action by present price declines."[113] ("The only really effective way to get out of the beef mess," he told one critic, "[is] to eat our way out."[114]) "*We need a nationwide repentance* to rid this land of corruption," he also proclaimed. "We must return to the fundamental virtues that have made this nation great. . . . May we have the courage to stand up and be counted to stand for principle, for those noble concepts and ideals which guided the founding fathers in the establishment of this great land."[115] "It was a matter of conscience," Benson's biographers observe, "that farmers be educated as to where their real interests lay."[116] Such religion-infused rhetoric, however, stressed what Benson viewed as farming's unhealthy elements and, for many listeners, not only blamed farmers and ranchers themselves—ostensibly, the inefficient—for their predicament, but presumed to lecture them on patriotism and loyalty to country.

Not unexpectedly, Democrats—and some farm-state Republicans—accused Benson of repudiating longstanding national policy. The backlash caught the new secretary off guard. "The roof fell in," he remembered. "There was a depth of feeling, a sacredness attached to the existing price support programs far greater than I had imagined. . . . I felt pretty low."[117] Fortunately, he was relieved to discover that Eisenhower agreed

with him. "I believe every word you said," the president consoled, then tempered this support with the comment, "but I'm not sure you should have said it quite so soon."[118] Others concurred that Benson's statements needed to be "couched in more acceptable" terms.[119] In fact, one of Benson's ecclesiastical seniors, J. Reuben Clark, frankly urged him "to get better acquainted with Congressmen, and try to work it out so that they would believe, the Congressmen would think they were proposing things that he wanted, rather than that he was proposing them"; and "to submit everything to the White House, and to secure approval for all announcements of policy which he made, not in a general way, but specifically." Clark, a former federal bureaucrat himself, also worried that Benson "was traveling too much; that a good deal could happen in the Home Office while he was away"; and that "he was talking too much."[120] Clark's advice fell on deaf ears, as Benson was convinced his "back-breaking" speaking tours were "essential" to his program.[121] "By being such an outspoken critic," his biographers note, "the Secretary made it difficult for himself when he [later] faced Congress with legislative proposals."[122]

In mid-1953, Benson announced he was tackling a sweeping review of federal farm policy, insisting "it has been undertaken without a preconception of what it should reveal."[123] He was speaking of the future of the U.S. government's various programs, not the elimination of price and other supports. "Agriculture needed 90 per cent of parity supports about as much as an athlete needs a strait jacket," he quipped.[124] Still, many congressmen responded with alarm, convinced that the fledgling bureaucrat—"a lamb among a pack of wolves," according to J. Reuben Clark—should have first met with congressional farm bloc representatives to appraise the acceptability of his proposed policies.[125] Renewed rumors of Benson's departure were quickly refuted by Republican and administration supporters.[126] With the establishment of a broadly constituted, eighteen-member National Agriculture Advisory Commission, Benson hoped to fashion "a more positive image of his leadership" and "build a groundswell of bipartisan support for future programs by calling for unity."[127] More importantly, David O. McKay reassured him by letter: "Your Agriculture policy is sound. Political dem[a]gogues seek to undermine your clear thinking. Loyal citizens are with you. Hold to your standards. God bless and guide you!"[128] Benson showed some weariness in his reply: "The days are difficult. . . . We go from one emergency and one fight into another."[129]

For example, just as he was able to point to some preliminary successes—a reorganized department, a fully staffed Advisory Commission, the granting of special loans and purchases of government stocks at reduced prices, the selling abroad of more than 40 million bushels of wheat, and the securing of increased storage space—Benson learned that his department was also beginning to incur large operating deficits: an estimated $35 million by 1955. Much of this sum had been incurred by funding research into new uses for agricultural products. He responded by trying to shift the costs for some federal programs to states receiving such aid as well as by cutting programs that could, he believed, be addressed more effectively locally.[130] "What we need," he told Eisenhower, "is some means of obtaining an understanding and acceptance of the principle of greater reliance on local effort."[131] But expenditures resulting from acts of God, such as droughts which periodically devastated portions of the country, proved to be more responsive to federal intervention than to local fiscal restraint.[132]

"Except for the President," Benson lamented to concerned Mormons toward the end of his first year in office,

> I am assured that no man in public life has a heavier responsibility at the present time [than I]. I feel the weight of it very keenly. The cross fires, pressures and political maneuvering associated with the office make the burden almost unbearable at times. I know that I have the faith and prayers of millions of people who are hoping and praying that the philosophies and principles which I am trying to advocate will prevail.
>
> Of course, the Church is on trial. This emphasizes the importance of all of us living our religion fully and maintaining every standard of the Church. Only in this way can you be of your greatest help.
>
> I hope you will not become unduly depressed when you read items deeply critical of me and my activities. This seems to be a part of the office and will be so, particularly during the ensuing year, which I feel confident, will be a crucial one and one fraught with political chicanery and political pressure to an unusual degree.[133]

V

Facing 1954, Benson knew it "was going to take a considerable amount of White House leadership to secure legislative support" for his reforms.[134] His penchant for sometimes taking sudden, seemingly "drastic" action without laying the groundwork with members of Congress or the administration—one of J. Reuben Clark's concerns—underscored what some observers insisted was an uninformed naivete about "the ways

of Washington" that both threatened to derail his momentum and to compromise unintentionally U.S. policy in other areas of national interest.[135] For his part, Benson saw such action—in this particular instance, the lowering of supports for butter—as decisive and necessary. "I would be appreciative," Eisenhower aide Sherman Adams cautioned him, "if you would have those in your Department cooperate more fully with the standard operating procedure."[136]

Benson's farm policy, which Eisenhower presented to Congress on January 11, 1954, was a "carefully constructed compromise" balancing a hard-line drive for lower price supports with the administration's politically nuanced advocacy of "gradualism."[137] It proposed, in part, that after 1954, federal price subsidies be slowly adjusted to reflect supply, thereby obtaining for farmers "greater stability of income." Then, effective January 1, 1956, supports on agricultural commodities would be based on "modernized parity"—reflecting the past decade's prices instead of those from 1910–14—with allowances made for incremental shifts from "old" to "modern" by permitting moves of up to 5 percentage points per year,[138] with supports and adjustments varying according to commodity. The intent, Eisenhower explained, was to reduce production and to stimulate consumption to the general benefit of "all 160,000,000 of our people," and not principally the agriculture sector.[139]

Immediately, Benson embarked on a countrywide speaking tour to drum up support, often addressing audiences he remembered as being latently hostile.[140] He announced: "I am unalterably opposed to programs that substitute government aid for reasonable self-help," insisting that success not be measured according to a "political applause meter."[141] He knew that small farmers could be hurt but was adamant that "most of agriculture's present problems can be met through increased research and education and improved marketing methods."[142] Benson's usual strategy was "to predict dire consequences . . . unless administration proposals were adopted immediately and in their entirety."[143] The need for such reform seemed obvious: The old parity system encouraged overproduction, diminishing markets, and ballooning storage costs. "I am fearful," Benson told the Senate Agriculture Committee in April 1954, "that if we do not heed the storm warning now on the horizon many positive gains in the field of agricultural legislation will be swept away."[144] Predictably, his program received a cool reception from most farm states and their representatives—Republicans and Democrats alike. Their response was to portray

Benson "as an enemy of the farmer."[145] Benson held his ground. "It's easy to keep calm," he told readers of *American Magazine,* "if you have inner security and peace of mind. . . . I try to do the thing I believe to be right and let the chips fall where they will."[145] Still, he took at least some of the opposition personally. "We are all our Father's children," he later wrote, "and as such we must love all men. I think I do. But at times I love some more than others."[146]

When Congress ultimately decided against lowering price supports, Eisenhower joined Benson in arguing the administration's case publicly, insisting that a transition to more flexible price supports would not bankrupt American farmers. "I know," Eisenhower asserted (with Benson concurring), "that what is right for America is politically right."[147] Farm states were not so sure, however, agreeing in principle with the notion of incrementalism but arguing for a more gradual implementation. As expected, Benson opposed any compromise, whereas Eisenhower was "prone to take half a loaf rather than none." Eisenhower knew that support in Congress was building to maintain parity at 90 percent and decided instead to settle for ranges from 82.5 percent to 90 percent, rather than 75 percent to 90 percent. The compromise passed and was signed into law on August 28, 1954.[148]

"We have had a weak and vacillating leadership," an annoyed Benson complained. "There is too much effort, too much action based on expediency and not enough on principles, eternal principles, which constitute the very foundation of all we hold dear as a great Christian nation."[149] Later, he reported, more judiciously:

> It had always been my characteristic to determine an objective and then drive directly at it, with no detours. But one day the President talked about this characteristic of mine and the difficulties it engendered when applied to political realities.
>
> The President took a pad of paper and with a black pencil marked a bold X at the top of the page. At the bottom, he drew a rough square. "Ezra," said he, "in the military you always have a major objective. This X is the objective. Here are our forces," pointing to the square. "Now, it might seem that the simplest thing to do is to go straight toward the objective. But that is not always the best way to get there. You may have to move to one side or the other. You may have to move around some obstacle. You may have to feint, to pull the defending forces out of position. You may encounter heavy enemy forces, and temporarily have to retreat. There may be some zigs and zags in your course as you move toward the objec-

> tive." I nodded. "That may have to be the way you work at this farm problem."
>
> I was thinking of General Ike's lesson in tactics when I agreed to the compromise, if necessary, on the level of support in order to get the principle of flexibility established.[150]

"While our principles have remained unchanged for a hundred years," Eisenhower explained, "the problems to which these principles must be applied have changed radically and rapidly."[151]

The Agriculture Act of 1954—which Benson credited with helping to "break" an obdurate "farm bloc"[152]—exempted $2.5 billion of stockpiled commodities from the calculation of federal price supports, introduced flexible parity to begin in 1955, and mandated that incremental parity take effect in 1956 until a transition to modern parity could be achieved.[153] In addition, the Department of Agriculture received $20 million more for 1955 than it had for 1954, this despite overall cuts in the federal budget totaling $12 billion. "All in all," Benson's biographers suggest optimistically, "rural America had been treated quite favorably by this legislation."[154] In his speeches, Benson was upbeat: "A new direction has been set toward greater responsibility and freedom for agriculture."[155] Yet he also found it impossible to suppress his own tendency toward paternalism: "The problems of agriculture cannot be solved through political hocus-pocus—through a government handout here and there—through this or that pressure group."[156]

To some, Benson seemed heartless. "You ask about my advice to farmers who face losing their homes, equipment, and life savings," he commented. "If I were in that condition, I would check closely to see if I was operating as efficiently as possible. . . . If this still did not prove satisfactory and I had a small farm that did not require my full attention, I would attempt to supplement my income through outside work."[158] Such simplistic, if well-intended, advice did not make Benson's job easier, or the opposition less vocal; and he began to wonder about his continuing value to the administration. But when, toward the end of 1954, he reminded Eisenhower he had originally agreed to serve for two years, the President was emphatic: "When you leave . . . I will leave."[159]

Central to Benson's plan for decreasing surpluses was maximizing sales overseas. When Benson took office, U.S. farm exports were at $2.8 million, a seven-year low.[159] With the passage of the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act in mid-1954, the administration was au-

thorized to sell surpluses for foreign currencies at losses of up to $700 million annually; to sell to friendly (i.e., non-Communist) nations at costs not to exceed $300 million during a three-year period; to distribute to distressed regions within the United States under certain conditions; and to acquire by barter products necessary for national security. Implementation devolved upon Benson and Harold Stassen (U.S. Director of Foreign Operations), with oversight by Clarence Francis (a former Eisenhower consultant). To no one's surprise, the "task of getting rid of surpluses . . . was a very involved and complicated process." Foreign currencies "had to be spent within the country making the purchase"; sales involving bartering or trading, preferential prices, or give-aways "tended to disrupt the normal channels of international trade"; while "selling below the world market price or invading territory traditionally belonging to another country was explicitly prohibited in the General Agreements on Trade and Tariffs (of which the U.S. was a signatory)."[160]

Because of the "monumental" challenges of disposing of crops long priced too expensively for world markets, Benson determined that "extraordinary" effort was required; and in 1955, he embarked on a trade mission to Latin America, Canada, and Europe.[161] He concluded he was "going to have to fight for markets and not be intimidated by retaliatory threats of import quotas."[162] (McKay thought that Benson at this time was "the strongest man in President Eisenhower's Cabinet."[163]) Within the administration, however, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles worried that Benson's approach to trade—which might be perceived as dumping—would alienate some countries. He consequently "pressed for a lenient trade policy which yielded if not outright forfeited markets to our allies and the non-aligned nations."[164] Given the competing goals, Agriculture "often found itself at odds" with State.[165] "We are not engaging in any cut-throat race for markets," Benson said, trying—unsuccessfully—to calm Canadian officials in mid-1955, "but there is no reason why we should not set an example for the world of friendly competition."[166] He also promised equally skeptical Europeans: "(1) we will compete fairly; (2) we will stress quality; and (3) we will seek mutually profitable deals."[167] Benson's assurances failed to convince, and countries lodging formal complaints regarding U.S. dumping included Australia, Burma, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Thailand, and Uruguay.[168]

Without question, the largest untapped foreign market for U.S. products was Communist countries.[169] Although both Benson and

Dulles were reluctant to trade with Communist regimes, they knew that a too-strict application of U.S. policy could be counter-productive to American interests. For example, when America refused to sell wheat—its most stockpiled commodity—to Poland, Polish leaders instead purchased it from Canada. Yugoslavia, after being turned down, bought from Russia, even though U.S. policy encouraged rapprochement.[170] As a result, the administration came to embrace the principle of "net advantage," believing that the United States gained "more by selling to Communist nations than by refusing to."[171] Benson opposed strengthening the economies of Communist countries; but bowing to pragmatism—as well as to U.S. farmers—he offered no public criticism of the new policy. After all, his biographers note, he wanted "desperately to get rid of domestic surpluses and this turn-about . . . would soon open up new markets heretofore sealed off."[172] Still, some congressmen complained that Benson favored sales over resisting Communism.[173]

As if to emphasize his department's anti-Communist credentials, Benson in mid-December 1954 announced that Agriculture would not be retaining Wolf Ladejinsky, a lateral transfer from State. Ladejinsky, an expert in Asian land reform, had entered U.S. government employ in 1935. Benson's initial reason for firing him was that the Russian Jewish immigrant was not sufficiently skilled but later asserted that he was also a security risk. When Ladejinsky's supporters protested, a public relations "hurricane" ensued. Soon it became known that Benson had relied on the advice of two aides, both of whom, according to historian Mary S. McAuliffe, had made "errors in procedure and judgment in handling the case." In particular, Milan D. Smith,[174] Benson's new executive assistant, had "inaccurately and incompletely briefed Benson, by furnishing him an inaccurate and incomplete summary of Ladejinsky's case file." Smith also wrote the announcement of Ladejinsky's termination "without a prior USDA investigation" and "circulated an anti-Semitic letter . . . as 'classic' evidence of what 'thinking people' believed about the Ladejinsky case." Though he emphatically disavowed any anti-Semitism, Benson refused to consider that his aides—both of whom were LDS—could be mistaken. Less than a month later, Eisenhower intervened to secure Ladejinsky's employment elsewhere in the government. Eventually, Benson retracted—but never repudiated—his claim that Ladejinsky was a security risk.[175]

As the Ladejinsky affair wound down, Benson returned to championing expanded research. At the time, industrial uses accounted for only

7 percent of the total quantity of American farm products produced.[176] The basic components of most agricultural commodities are cellulose, starch, sugar, oils, and protein; and Benson decided to authorize contracts with private industry to "(1) [develop] commercial uses for dialdehyde starches; (2) [manufacture] paper products from cereal starches; (3) [find] uses for wheat glutens; and (4) [extract] substances from grain for the making of resins, plasticizers, and chemicals." He also supported "seeking new uses for carbohydrates, dried whole milk, and cotton," together with "raising such new and exotic crops as bamboo, kenaf (for twine), jojoba (for wax), safflower (for oil), sesame, pistachio nuts, sunflowers, and high amylose corn for starch."[177] But some administration officials believed that he should have relied even more heavily on the private sector, and expressed concerns when annual expenditures for research consistently exceeded appropriations. More money, they worried, was being spent on "developing more productive varieties of seeds, finding better fertilizers, discovering new pesticides, and improving cultivation techniques" than on finding new uses.[178]

Benson's efforts, especially at improving farming methods, actually helped to "create more surpluses—not to find ways to dispose of them."[179] "I knew how a ship captain must feel as he watches his badly leaking vessel take water," he remembered. "Surpluses had become the number-one problem in U.S. agriculture. No real hope of improving farm income was in sight until the surpluses could be liquidated."[180] Benson quickly came to appreciate that more concrete results were needed—"there simply is no easy way to unload a surplus"[181]—and by 1955 also admitted that "no administrator in government could function without taking cognizance of political cross-currents." In practical terms, this meant "seeking to placate certain segments of the farm population"[182]—in other words, compromise or, as Benson now ruefully quipped, "rising above principle."[183]

VI

Knowing that as Republicans prepared for the 1956 general elections "the farm situation has worsened while we have been in office,"[184] Eisenhower directed Benson to take "temporary or specific action" to "meet any current emergency with which the American farmer and his family are faced." In other circumstances, Benson would have "resisted any thought of allowing pure politics to enter into his decision-making." However, Eisenhower's instruction was not a request, and Benson was a

mostly loyal foot soldier. After consulting with staff, he responded by proposing a "retirement plan" to remove arable land from cultivation and transfer it to a federal "Soil Bank." Thus, surpluses would be "prevented by bringing commodity production into adjustment with market demands."[185] *"We would use the surplus to use up the surplus"* was how Benson expressed it.[186]

Though the idea was not new, Benson's proposal centered on the concepts of "acreage" and "conservation" reserves. Under Benson's plan, American farmers would be paid for productive acres taken out of cultivation and deposited in acreage reserves at rates approximately one-half of what they normally received from the government for their crops, usually corn, cotton, rice, and wheat. Preliminary estimates placed the cost at $455–$650 million annually. Lower yielding land could be placed in conservation reserves. Estimates here were reportedly more difficult to make, but "it was obvious that this type of program would cost substantial sums of money."[187] Benson insisted that acreage reserves was strictly a "short-term emergency program . . . intended to hit the surplus a mighty blow."[188] He knew the Soil Bank was far from ideal;[189] but, his biographers point out, he "was under White House pressure to find a way to help farmers financially while simultaneously solving the dilemma of overproduction."[190]

As he recuperated from a minor heart attack, Eisenhower in early 1956 responded to renewed calls for a return to 90 percent parity by stressing that retiring land from cultivation would help to prevent the accumulation of new surpluses.[191] Benson worked to convince himself and others that the program, in fact, complemented his own drive for flexible-to-no price supports. He wanted "passage of a Soil Bank without any encumbrances."[192] What Congress eventually handed him and the administration, however, was a partisan-friendly "omnibus measure with many attractive but costly vote-getting features."[193] ("The two times when people are apt to be most unstable," Benson observed, "are when they are in love and when they are running for office."[194]) Most distressingly, in Benson's view, the bill "surreptitiously returned price supports back to 90 per cent of parity."[195] "In a democracy such as ours," one of the administration's congressional supporters countered, "we must always compromise."[196]

Benson, disgusted by the strong-arming, again contemplated resigning.[197] Despite some staff support for the bill, Eisenhower was disappointed as well and responded that he would have to veto it: "In the long

run it would have hurt all farmers."[198] He then "let it be known" that he would be willing to compromise on parity, intimating that while he could not support a return to 90 percent, he would not insist on 75 percent, but would allow it to remain at 82.5 percent. When the revised bill was finally signed into law, Eisenhower believed the Soil Bank was "rich with promise" for "improving our agriculture situation."[199] The bill authorized a Soil Bank for three years, with $750 million for acreage reserves and $450 million for conservation reserves. Approximately half a million farmers deposited 11 million acres in the acreage reserve and about 1.5 million acres in the Conservation reserve.[200] As it turned out, however, the Soil Bank passed too late in the year to affect production levels significantly for 1956.[201]

Although hopeful about the Soil Bank,[202] Benson was dismayed at Eisenhower's concession on price supports. "This was the first, and I guess the only time that I was really disappointed in the President," he wrote in his memoirs. "His veto was an act of raw political courage. Why negate it in part by putting off the inevitable dropping of support levels? He did it, I knew, out of good motivation; because he feared there might be no protective legislation enacted at all that year for farmers. And he did it, too, because he believed in the gradual approach."[203]

Stumping for the Republican Party that fall,[204] Benson tried to position himself as a "rational reformer," pointing out "the weaknesses of the price support system which had frozen production into uneconomic patterns by ignoring new consumer preferences and market demands." However, opponents portrayed him as a "callous businessman interested only in serving large landowners or big corporations."[205] While many economists favored flexible supports, their views "could not compete with the oversimplified political rhetoric of [Benson's] detractors."[206] In the end, Eisenhower's considerable popularity returned him to office,[207] but Republican support in six Midwestern farm states was slipping.[208] And Democrats gained slightly greater control of both Houses. "The election proved one thing," Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn (D-Texas) observed, "and that is that the people like and want President Eisenhower, but they do not like or want the Republican party." Benson may have genuinely believed that the "headlines in agriculture are not all bad,"[209] but a less partisan analysis would have foreseen a second term as turbulent as the first.

[Part 2 follows in the winter 2008 issue.]

Notes

1. Ezra Taft Benson, *Cross Fire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), 212.

2. David O. McKay, Diary, November 5, 1952, photocopy, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

3. McKay, letter to Eisenhower, November 6, 1952, copy in McKay, Diary, November 6, 1962. At Eisenhower's inauguration, McKay commented that the new administration "is the turning point in United States, if not in world history." Quoted in "Pres. McKay Hails Ike as Good Omen," *Deseret News,* January 22, 1953, clipping in McKay, Diary, January 18–24, 1953. Two years later, Eisenhower invited McKay to join him at one of the president's informal men-only "stag dinners." "I was thrilled with it," McKay recalled, "just to be there in the headquarters of the nation which Destiny has placed at the head of the world." McKay, Diary, April 15, May 7–12, and May 13, 1955.

4. See McKay's comments to Ned Redding, in McKay, Diary, November 25, 1952; Henry A. Smith, "Elder Benson's Selection Distinct Honor to Church," *Church News,* November 29, 1952, 4; and "Congratulatory Messages Pour into Elder Benson's Office," *Church News,* December 6, 1952, 3.

5. McKay, Diary, November 20, 1954. Later, Watkins told McKay that "he was grateful to God that a prophet of God was in the Cabinet." Ibid., November 25, 1952. LDS apostles are sustained by Church members as "prophets, seers, and revelators."

6. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 4. Benson's memoir draws largely on the ten volumes of personal diary—containing "some three-quarters of a million words"—he maintained during this time. Ibid., xvii. Benson's authorized biographer, Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 525, notes that his diary "for this period was particularly detailed."

7. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 5; and Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture: The Eisenhower Years, 1953–1961* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1975), 14. Taft, a prominent mid-twentieth-century American conservative, had also campaigned unsuccessfully for the nomination in 1940 and 1948. "I admired [Taft] more than any other man in political life," Benson later wrote. "He was that rare specimen—a dogged, dedicated bulldog fighter of character who knew how to lose." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 23. For McKay's support of Taft, see his comments in J. Reuben Clark, Diary, July 1, 1957, Clark Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. The Greek Revival Church Administration Building at 47 E.

South Temple was known as the Church Office Building until 1972 when the name was assigned to the newly constructed twenty-six-story building through the block at 50 E. North Temple.

8. Nearly twenty-four years later, Benson recalled telling McKay: "I had hoped you'd have a different feeling. I don't want that job." "Prophet Remembers Telephone Call from President Eisenhower in '53 [sic]," *Church News*, June 1, 1984, 6.

9. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 8–9.

10. See Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 12–15. The Schapsmeiers' study focuses on Benson's agricultural policies. See also their "Religion and Reform: A Case Study of Henry A. Wallace and Ezra Taft Benson," *Journal of Church and State* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 525–35; and "Eisenhower and Ezra Taft Benson: Farm Policy in the 1950s," *Agricultural History,* 44 (October 1970): 369–78.

11. See Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President,* Vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 24. Compare Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 285 note 5.

12. McKay, Diary, November 24, 1952.

13. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 10–11.

14. The last clergyman to have served in a U.S. president's cabinet was Unitarian minister Edward Everett, appointed Secretary of State to Millard Fillmore (1852–53).

15. By this time, Eisenhower attended Presbyterian services, though he would tell nationally syndicated columnist Drew Pearson that "freedom" and "God" comprised his religion. Geoffrey Perret, *Eisenhower* (New York: Random House, 1999), 428. During the months prior to his election, Eisenhower had commented: "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is. . . . [B]ut it must be a religion that [teaches that] all men are created equal." Quoted in Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America since World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 40.

16. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–56* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1963), 89.

17. "When President McKay had encouraged him to accept it, he had no viable alternative." Francis M. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson: Statesman, Patriot, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 180.

18. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 8–12.

19. Quoted in Smith, "Elder Benson's Selection," 4. A month before, Benson had visited the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. "As I stood looking up," he recalled, "there came into my heart, such a surge of gratitude

for the privilege of being a citizen of this land, for the priceless blessing of being an American, as I had never known before." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 571. Benson would have interpreted such a feeling as personal revelation. He does not mention this incident in his diary. Diary, October 17–24, 1952, photocopy of holograph courtesy of the Smith-Pettit Foundation.

20. Frederick W. Babbel, Oral History, interviewed by Maclyn P. Burg, November 12, 1974, and February 5, 1975, 42, photocopy courtesy of David F. Babbel, in possession of the Smith-Pettit Foundation; Merlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 69; and Benson, *Cross Fire*, 13.

21. McKay, Diary, November 28, 1952. Unlike most entries in McKay's diary, which are typed, this one is in McKay's handwriting.

22. Dew, *Benson*, 259.

23. Quoted in Merlo J. Pusey, "Ezra Taft Benson: A Living Witness for Christ," *Improvement Era,* April 1956, 269.

24. Pusey, *Eisenhower*, 69, reported an increase to $40,000. Benson said it was closer to nearly three times $25,000.

25. Ibid. The dramatic decrease in salary was difficult for the Bensons. They regularly drew on personal savings to cover routine living costs and reluctantly, but gratefully, accepted cash and other gifts from friends, notably restaurateur J. Willard Marriott. For a time, they also contemplated selling their Salt Lake City house. See, for example, Benson, Diary, November 19, 1949.

26. By February 1948, the Church newspaper was reporting favorably on Benson's speaking to scores of "farm bureaus and cooperatives." "News about the General Authorities," *Church News,* February 14, 1948, 3.

27. See "Set of Farmer Cooperative Yearbooks Given to Church," *Church News,* April 10, 1949, 6C. In mid-1952, the First Presidency permitted Benson to chair the institute provided that it did not engage in activities that "interfered with individual liberty" and that Benson "not devote so much of his time to other interests that the Twelve would be deprived of his help." McKay, Diary, August 1 and 5, 1952.

28. Gibbons, *Benson*, 162; also "Two Members of the Twelve Noted Birthday Anniversaries Last Week," *Church News,* August 6, 1952, 3.

29. "It is my firm belief," he explained, "that the God of Heaven guided the founding fathers in establishing this great nation for His particular purposes. This is *not* just another nation. We in this choice land have a great and glorious mission to perform for liberty-loving people everywhere." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 578.

30. Ibid., 571; also 571–81.

31. Benson's embrace of individual freedom and a religion "in which the ultimate executive, legislative, and judicial authority is vested in one man, the prophet," may seem inconsistent. In this case, Benson's belief in the LDS Church and its leadership trumped his views on government and economics. As a former secretary to the First Presidency explains: Benson "approved of the Church system because of its greater efficiency and the unquestioned integrity of the prophet. Moreover, he found in the leading councils of the Church a disposition to hear the views of all and a reluctance to move forward unless there was a unanimity of feeling, despite the authority of the prophet to act unilaterally." Gibbons, *Benson*, 140. Benson also saw membership in the Church as voluntary and thus not at odds with personal liberty.

32. Benson, *Principles of Cooperation* (Salt Lake City: N.p., 1945), not paginated. See also Benson's comments in "News about the General Authorities," *Church News,* September 6, 1947, 5, and November 15, 1947, 5. References to Benson's speeches to farmers' and cooperative groups may be found in this regularly appearing column in issues of the *Church News*, a weekend supplement to the Church-owned *Deseret News*.

33. Benson, "Concerning Principles and Standards," BYU Commencement Address, June 4, 1947, *Church News,* June 14, 1947, 5. Benson repeated this advice three years later. See "Concerning Values," Utah State Agricultural College Baccalaureate Address, May 28, 1950, *Church News,* June 4, 1950, 15. One of the fullest expressions of Benson's political views during the late 1940s is the talk he delivered at the annual conference of the Church's Relief Society on September 28, 1949, reprinted in Reed A. Benson, comp., *So Shall Ye Reap: Selected Addresses of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 220–31.

34. Benson, "The L.D.S. Church and Politics," an address to the BYU student body, December 1, 1952 (Distributed by the BYU Extension Division and Delta Phi Organization), 8.

35. Kenneth S. Davis, *New York Times Magazine*, quoted in "New Agricultural Leader Brings Farm 'Co-op' Movement to Front," *Church News,* January 24, 1953, 14.

36. Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 24.

37. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 587.

38. Benson, "Concerning Principles and Standards," 5. Benson repeated this advice eight years later; see his baccalaureate address to BYU students, June 2, 1955, in "Speeches of the Year" (Distributed by the BYU Extension Division and Delta Phi Organization), 20, and in "'Jesus Increased in Wisdom and Stature and in Favor with God,'" *Church News,* June 11, 1955, 6.

39. "When a man is ordained to the apostleship of this Church," one of

Benson's colleagues told Church members following Benson's appointment as Secretary of Agriculture, "that is not just a job, but is a power from Almighty God, and that power will remain in him so long as he knows that down in his soul there is a fire of testimony and a determination to serve God at all hazard and keep His commandments, and then there will be given inspiration and revelation." Harold B. Lee, Address, March 1, 1953, quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 28.

40. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 28–29.

41. Chester J. Pach Jr. and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, rev. ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 35, 55. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 363, acknowledged that he could sometimes be seen as "dogmatic."

42. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 390.

43. Ezra Taft Benson, Oral History, Interviewed by Maclyn Burg, May 21, 1975, 23–24, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

44. Benson, Diary, April 5, 1952.

45. Benson, "Responsibilities of Citizenship," an address to BYU students, October 22, 1954 (Distributed by the BYU Extension Division and Delta Phi Organization), 7.

46. "Secretary Benson was the target for more organized and sustained attacks than anyone else in high government office," was how an article in the official LDS Church press later described it. Derin Head Rodriguez, "Flora Amussen Benson: Handmaiden of the Lord, Helpmeet of a Prophet, Mother in Zion," *Ensign*, March 1987, 19.

47. J. Earl Coke, "Reminiscences on People and Change in California Agriculture 1900–1975," Interviews conducted by Ann Foley Scheuring, University of California Davis, Oral History Center, 1976, 111, photocopy in Perry Special Collections.

48. Benson, "The L.D.S. Church and Politics," 6, 9.

49. Benson, Oral History, 8.

50. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 5–8. Pusey noted: "In 1948, Governor Dewey had been so confident that he would be the next President that he did not wait until after the election to sound out his friend Benson about becoming his Secretary of Agriculture." Pusey, *Eisenhower,* 67. For contemporary references to Benson's possible nomination to a Dewey Cabinet, see Benson, Diary, September 30, October 27, and October 30, 1948. "This is all very interesting, and no doubt flattering," Benson noted on October 30. "My only interest is the good I might be able to do for the Church and the country. I have no desire for political office as such."

51. "The appointment seems to be a natural one," is how the Church's press secretary described it. Smith, "Elder Benson's Selection."

52. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 142.

53. Asked about his years with Benson, McKay reassured the FBI: "There was never an intimation of his being connected in any way with subversive organizations." McKay, Diary, November 25, 1952.

54. Gibbons, *Benson*, 185, notes that these appointees were sometimes called the "Mormon Mafia."

55. McKay, Diary, November 26, 1952; "Congratulatory Messages"; Benson, *Cross Fire*, 31–32.

56. Gary James Bergera, "Ezra Taft Benson's 1946 Mission to Europe," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 73–112.

57. "Elders Haycock and Babbel Join Secretary Benson's Staff," *Church News,* January 10, 1953, 4; McKay, Diary, December 5, 1952. Haycock had been secretary to LDS President George Albert Smith. When McKay succeeded Smith, McKay retained his own secretary. Thus, the invitation that Haycock join Benson was fortuitously timed. Haycock remained with Benson for eighteen months until called to preside over the Church's Hawaii Mission. Heidi S. Swinton, *In the Company of Prophets: Personal Experiences of D. Arthur Haycock . . .* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 45–47. Following McKay's death in 1970, Haycock served as secretary to the next four Church presidents.

58. "'What I Admire Most in My Husband,' by Mrs. Ezra Taft Benson [Flora Amussen Benson], as told to Leonard J. Snyder," *Capper's Farmer,* June 1955, 47.

59. Babbel, Oral History, 39–40.

60. Don Paarlberg, Oral History, Interviewed by Ed Edwin, January 17, 1968, 3–4, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

61. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 35.

62. "Complete Text Given at Request of Readers," *Church News,* February 7, 1953, 2–3. See also "Elder Benson Gives Prayer for Cabinet," *Church News,* January 17, 1953, 10; "Sec. Benson's Prayer at Initial Cabinet Meeting," *Church News,* January 31, 1953, 4; and Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 261–62. The version of Benson's prayer in *Cross Fire*, 37–38, varies only slightly from that printed here. For parallels to LDS scripture, compare 1 Nephi 2:20; 2 Nephi 1:5; Ether 2:7, 10, 15; Doctrine and Covenants 101:77, 80.

63. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 33, 49–50, 59–60. One of Benson's assistants later quipped: "At the first [Cabinet meeting] Ike had Ezra do the praying, but I am informed that after the first one he decided that he'd have silent prayer because Ezra took too darn much time to pray." Coke, "Reminiscences," 112.

A notable exception occurred when Eisenhower began one meeting without the minute of silence, then exclaimed: "Goddammit! We forgot the silent prayer!" Perret, *Eisenhower,* 437. Later, Benson seemed to imply that this moment of silence was actually a vocal prayer: "For both terms (eight years) of the Eisenhower presidency," he reported in 1969, "Cabinet meetings were opened with prayer." Ezra Taft Benson, *God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 127. This misstatement was subsequently repeated. See, for example, "Prophet Remembers Telephone Call"; Gibbons, *Benson*, 184; and Reed A. Benson, "Ezra Taft Benson: The Eisenhower Years," in *Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 54–55. At least once, however, in Eisenhower's absence, Benson was invited to pray vocally. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 246.

64. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 47–48.

65. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 51, also 50–54.

66. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 108.

67. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 47. "They were from an agricultural background, or economics or law or administrative things, organizations," Don Paarlberg agreed. "Some of them had had political experience, but a limited number. So it was a little bit like getting on an express train that hadn't really slowed down for the station. I had that feeling for some time." Paarlberg, Oral History, 3.

68. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 41.

69. Ibid., 41–42.

70. See, for example, Benson, *Cross Fire*, 108–9.

71. Babbel, Oral History, 68–69, 73, 108. See also Benson, *Cross Fire*, 32.

72. Other LDS appointees, in addition to Babbel and Haycock, included Hulda Parker (who replaced Haycock), Ralph S. Roberts (administrative assistant secretary), and, in succession as Benson's executive assistant(s): Daken K. Broadhead, Lorenzo N. Hoopes, Milan D. Smith, Miller F. Shurtleff, and Mark Kirkham. Hoopes recalled: "I've never worked harder than I did in that two year period [1953–54]." Lorenzo N. and Stella S. Hoopes, Oral History, Interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, May 23, 1989, 7, Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter LDS Church Archives).

73. Babbel, Oral History, 76–77. For a discussion of Benson's non-LDS appointments, see Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 47–50.

74. Babbel, Oral History, 99–103.

75. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 53.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Babbel, Oral History, 87–89. Contemporary accounts of the incident bear out some of these perceptions. A Washington, D.C.-based journalist reported: "Employees of the department, who had become accustomed to knocking off for the day 15 or 20 minutes early to catch a bus or to get in a little shopping, were notified that he [Benson] expects a full day's work for a full day's pay." Quoted in "Secretary Benson Rearranges Things in Agriculture Offices," *Church News,* February 7, 1953, 15.

79. "The Secretary was a rather forgiving type of person," Babbel subsequently asserted, Oral History, 109, "so that he had not regarded this with too much misgiving."

80. Ibid., 90–92.

81. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 31, 87. See also "Revolution, Not Revolt," *Time,* May 7, 1956, 30: "When he [Benson] arrives at the office shortly before 8, he has already done about two hours of work."

82. "Apostle at Work," *Time,* April 13, 1953, 26; and "Secretary Benson Rearranges Things." Benson's daily work schedule as secretary did not differ much from his routine as an apostle and earlier.

83. Dew, *Benson*, 268.

84. Babbel, Oral History, 143.

85. Ibid., 120.

86. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, xviii. According to *Time* magazine, "Revolution, Not Revolt," 30, the slogan was placed "where only he could see it." In addition, Benson displayed on an office wall a photograph of Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvalden's massive *Christus* statue. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 463.

87. Coke, "Reminiscences," 111.

88. Babbel, Oral History, 135–36, 137–38. Benson "had what we called a squawk box where he had intercommunications," Babbel continued. ". . . [W]e always had free access to him on any matters that seemed to be urgent" (140–41).

89. Ibid., 145, 146. From his perspective as a non-Mormon, Coke, "Reminiscences," 111, concurred: "He had, however, I think, a more basic interest in his church work than in being secretary of agriculture."

90. Babbel, Oral History, 122–23, 124.

91. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 88.

92. Paul Friggens, "Meet the New Secretary and His Family," *Farm Journal* (Western Edition), January 1953, 28. Benson's advocacy of free enterprise was well known to readers of the LDS *Church News.*

93. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 7–8.

94. Benson, Oral History, 21.

95. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 38–39; see also Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 36–37.

96. One night, shortly after assuming office, Benson returned to his apartment and, feeling suddenly overwhelmed, "broke down and wept aloud." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 50.

97. Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 287.

98. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, xvi.

99. Cochrane, *American Agriculture,* 287.

100. Fixed price supports were introduced in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace believed that "rugged individualism and unregulated competition were outmoded and actually immoral, since they fostered the existence of poverty amid plenty." Quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Wallace and Benson," 529.

101. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 39 note 3.

102. "Apostle at Work," 27 note. The early 1910s were chosen because "it was one in which farm and nonfarm prices appear to have been in reasonable balance with one another." Ezra Taft Benson (as told to Carlisle Bargeron), *Farmers at the Crossroads* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1956), 107.

103. Cochrane, *American Agriculture,* 140.

104. Ibid.

105. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 58. Benson defined the typical marginal farm as "small, ill-equipped, poor soil farm run by an operator with subpar education and skill and very little capital." Ibid. For Benson's critics, he seemed to be singling out poor, black, Southern sharecroppers.

106. According to Harold H. Martin, "Elder Benson's Going to Catch It!" *Saturday Evening Post,* March 28, 1953, 23, "For all his interest in farms and farming," Benson is "at heart a preacher."

107. Benson, "America: A Choice Land," an address to the National Conference of Christians and Jews, May 11, 1953, 14, copy in Ernest L. Wilkinson Papers, Perry Special Collections; emphasis his.

108. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 603. A decade later, Benson wrote: "There is not a single basic thought [in the statement] I would change." Ibid., 62. In a treatment more critical than their book-length study, two of Benson's biographers contend: "Benson's moralistic pronouncement about the virtues of laissez-faire economics sounded like an ideological edict from a spokesman of the radical right. . . . In one stroke the new Secretary had created a politically damaging image of himself as an uncompromising disciple of a Hoover-type

individualism and unregulated free enterprise." Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Benson," 370.

109. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 39. "While we might effectively bridle or destroy every so-called Communist within our own borders," Benson told graduating seniors at the University of Utah in mid-1953, "we shall not vanquish this political virus, and its common forerunner, state socialism, so long as people are determined to achieve security through state-imposed materialistic schemes rather than through righteous living and wholesome activity as free men." "Courageous Leaders Great Need of Our Time," *Church News,* June 13, 1953, 7.

110. "An Exclusive Interview with Secretary of Agriculture Ezra T. Benson," *Agricultural and Food Chemistry,* August 5, 1953, 657; and Benson, *Cross Fire*, 59. "We should remember," Benson added in "Exclusive Interview," 660, "that one out of every six persons in the Nation lives on a farm and that their well-being touches directly or indirectly on all of us."

111. Five percent of American farmers owned half of all farm-related acreage and produced half of all farm-related produce. Perret, *Eisenhower,* 513–14.

112. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 58.

113. Ibid., 39–40; see also Benson, *Cross Fire*, 63–67. Most of Benson's farming-related speeches were ghost-written. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 119.

114. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 64.

115. Ibid., 66; emphasis his. "My biggest problem," Benson later confessed, "is a tendency to speak too long." Ibid., 122.

116. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 54.

117. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 67, 68–69. In mid-1958, Benson reported that the response to this early speech had bothered him most as secretary. See "A Cabinet Member Says: 'Don't Let Unpopularity Scare You,'" *This Week Magazine,* August 17, 1958, 8.

118. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 40; and Benson, *Cross Fire*, 70. According to Utah's Republican senator, Eisenhower had "complete faith in Ezra Benson." Wallace F. Bennett, letter to "Dear Family," February 19, 1953, in Bennett Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Benson," 371, point out: "The Administration was forced to defend an Agriculture Secretary even before a farm program had been sent to Congress." "For all his rough talk about getting rid of the incompetent," Eisenhower's biographer explains, "Eisenhower found it extremely difficult to fire anyone who had been loyal to him." Ambrose, *Eisenhower,* 298.

119. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 44. Benson may have

sensed as much. "Many of our friends feel that we have talked enough about self-sufficiency and freedom," he wrote in mid-1953. Ibid., 57.

120. Clark, Diary, April 9, 1953.

121. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 113. "It was absolutely essential that we have the cooperation of, and make use of, the mass media," he explained. "Because of this, I deliberately held rather frequent press conferences, in Washington and out in the country." Benson, Interviewed by Ed Edwin, June 23, 1967, 1, LDS Church Archives.

122. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 45–46. On the other hand, some Benson supporters believed he "should fight for what he thinks is right." Karl D. Butler, memorandum, September 18, 1953, carbon copy attached to Ernest L. Wilkinson, letter to J. Reuben Clark, September 24, 1953. "I wonder," J. Reuben Clark wrote back, "if the writer is as wise as he writes. It does not look too rosy for our friend [Benson]." Clark, letter to Wilkinson, September 29, 1953; both in Clark Papers.

123. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 59.

124. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 73.

125. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 59–60; Clark, letter to D. Arthur Haycock, October 21, 1953, Clark Papers.

126. See, for example, Wallace F. Bennett, "The Story behind the Attacks on Secretary Benson," October 27, 1953, mimeographed copy in Clark Papers.

127. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 65.

128. In McKay, Diary, October 28, 1953. "Do not become discouraged," one of Benson's colleagues in the Quorum of Twelve Apostles added. "Remember that you are just like a missionary back there. You are doing more good than one hundred missionaries in the field. It is just marvelous the splendid reports we hear about you." Mark E. Petersen, Letter to Ezra Taft Benson, November 4, 1953, in Ezra Taft Benson Scrapbooks, microfilm, LDS Church Archives.

129. Quoted in McKay, Diary, October 28, 1953.

130. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 65–66.

131. Ibid., 67.

132. Ibid., 68. For a long time, Benson believed that "in the drought problem, in particular, there was altogether too much dependence on the Federal Government." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 348.

133. Benson, Open letter to "My Brothers and Sisters," November 9, 1953, in Benson Scrapbooks.

134. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 69.

135. Ibid.

136. Ibid., 70.

137. Ibid., 70–71. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 401, thought of compromise as "the favorite political dodge of those in difficulty."

138. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 71–72. See also Benson, *Cross Fire*, 164–66.

139. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 73. Eisenhower's biographer notes: "Farm policy was an area in which he [Eisenhower] had deep and unchangeable convictions . . . [and] the only area in which Eisenhower called for a repudiation of the basic New Deal economic structure." Ambrose, *Eisenhower,* 160.

140. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 175. Benson tried to combine such trips with ecclesiastical visits to local LDS congregations. See, for example, "Sec. Benson Greets Elders at Border," *Church News,* July 10, 1954, 3.

141. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 75.

142. Ibid., 76.

143. Ibid., 79.

144. Ibid., 78.

145. "The American Magazine Says: Secretary Benson Coolest Man in Capitol, Sitting on Hottest Seat," *Church News,* May 29, 1954, 15.

146. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 182.

147. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 81.

148. Ibid., 83–84. See also Benson, *Cross Fire*, 211. Henry Wallace, Benson's predecessor, also supported a concept of flexibility. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Benson," 373.

149. Benson, "Responsibilities of Citizenship," 8.

150. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 203. Eisenhower's comments "impressed the Secretary very much," Paarlberg recalled, "and he passed this on to his staff. His nature was exactly opposed to that. He was a forthright man, and fainting [sic] and retreating and zigging and zagging were not really part of his makeup. I'm not sure that the President's point really got through to the Secretary." Paarlberg, Oral History, 13. "It was a lesson that Benson remembers but not one he chose to absorb," one of Eisenhower's biographers observes more bluntly. Perret, *Eisenhower,* 514.

151. Eisenhower, quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 273. Eisenhower "possessed the native instinct for adapting to the exigencies of politics," allowing "himself sufficient latitude . . . to remain flexible." Ibid., 272–73. According to Benson's authorized biographer, in contrast, "Subtlety was not Secretary Benson's forte." Dew, *Benson*, 289.

152. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 213.

153. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 84–86.

154. Ibid., 86–87.

155. Ibid., 88–89.

156. Ibid., 90.

157. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 238.

158. Ibid., 221; Clark, Diary, March 21, 1955. Eisenhower added: "My gratitude is equaled only by my profound hope that I may continue to have your invaluable assistance as long as I shall be called on to bear any governmental responsibility." Quoted in Benson, *Cross Fire*, 225. Also during the fall 1954 campaign season, Benson found himself briefly entangled in the Douglas R. Stringfellow affair. Stringfellow, elected as Utah Congressman in 1952, portrayed himself as a decorated World War II hero, his paraplegia the result of wounds suffered during the war. In early October 1954, Benson endorsed the colorful, conservative Republican. Two weeks later, Stringfellow, after being threatened with exposure, admitted publicly that he had lied about his past and that he could walk with the aid of a cane. He was replaced on the ballot by Henry Aldous Dixon, who won. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 217–18, intimated that he first learned of Stringfellow's deception on October 17, 1954. However, David O. McKay and he had confronted Stringfellow four days earlier, and McKay had kept Benson apprised of developments. McKay, Diary, October 13–16; Arthur V. Watkins, *Enough Rope* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 155–68; "Douglas R. Stringfellow," www.museumofhoaxes.com (accessed December 7, 2005); and especially Frank H. Jonas, *The Story of a Political Hoax* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1966).

159. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 238.

160. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 99–100.

161. For Benson's visits-in-tandem to local LDS congregations, see McKay, Diary, March 8, 1955. Benson was "intensely interested" in Latin America—site, he believed, of events narrated in the Book of Mormon. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 238.

162. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 101, 117.

163. McKay, Diary, March 10, 1955.

164. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 110. J. Reuben Clark felt that Dulles "had an acquaintance with world figures and the views of those figures," which "would appeal to anybody who did not have it," but that personally he doubted if Dulles "had much wisdom." Clark, Diary, March 21, 1955. Benson, at least publicly, held Dulles "in high respect and deep affection" and considered him "as one of the few great Secretaries of State." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 439, 443.

165. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 111. Eisenhower aide Sher-

man Adams thought that Benson was "enveloped in a kind of celestial optimism." Quoted in Perret, *Eisenhower*, 516.

166. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 102.

167. Ibid., 103.

168. Ibid., 111. "Comparatively speaking," the Schapsmeiers conclude, "the United States showed considerable restraint at a period when it could no longer ignore the plight of its own domestic agriculture." Ibid., 118. Benson unloaded 4 billion bushels of wheat, 2.5 billion pounds of dairy products, and 4.5 billion pounds of cottonseed products. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Benson," 374.

169. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 105.

170. Ibid., 109–10.

171. Ibid., 110.

172. Ibid.

173. Ibid., 113–16. "I'd trade with the devil if I got a good deal," Benson told farmers in Washington state in early 1957. "I won't just barge ahead and trade with the Iron Curtain countries. I plan to keep close contact with the State Department on any such trade." "Benson Urges Market Fight," *Salt Lake Tribune,* February 13, 1957, 2.

174. Prior to joining Benson's staff, Smith had served the LDS Church as president of the Union Stake in Oregon. See "Pres. Milan D. Smith Named to High Office," *Church News,* November 6, 1954, 5. Smith left Benson's employ in late 1957.

175. See Mary S. McAuliffe, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and Wolf Ladejinsky: The Politics of the Declining Red Scare, 1954–55," *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* 14, no. (Fall 1982):109–27. Benson later said he was "sorry about this regrettable case" but believed his initial decision had been correct. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 226–29. McAuliffe, 119 note 43, concludes that some of Benson's version of events is "distorted" and "misleading." Merlo Pusey adds: "Some months later Secretary Benson belatedly expunged all reference to Ladejinsky as a security risk from the records of his Department." Pusey, *Eisenhower*, 281. In 1963, Benson asserted that "the first communist cell in our government, so far as we know, was organized in the United States Department of Agriculture in the 1930's." Ezra Taft Benson, *Title of Liberty,* compiled by Mark A. Benson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 43.

176. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 119.

177. Ibid., 120–21.

178. Ibid., 122. Like many others, Benson believed that "with proper safeguards there was no danger involved from residues [from pesticides] that remained in the water or soil." Ibid., 229. Following the publication of Ra-

chel Carson's indictment of the pesticide industry, *Silent Spring,* in 1962, Benson was widely rumored to have wondered why a "spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics?" Because she "was probably a Communist." However, Carson's biographer could find no evidence that Benson ever actually made such a comment. Linda J. Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 429, 573 note 4.

179. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 122.

180. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 257, 258.

181. Ibid., 259.

182. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 123–24. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 272, agreed: "There was a need for legislation that would help farmers get rid of surpluses."

183. "Revolution, Not Revolt," 32.

184. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 126–27.

185. Ibid., 130.

186. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 293; emphasis his.

187. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 133.

188. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 291.

189. Initially, Benson called the program a "land rental scheme." Quoted in "Revolution, Not Revolt," 32. He later explained: "The idea of paying farmers for not producing—even as a one-shot emergency measure—outraged my sensibilities. The only real justification was that the government itself had been so largely responsible for the mess farmers were in." *Cross Fire*, 294.

190. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 134, also 153: "What worried Benson was the prospect of not being able to remedy the situation because of overconcern with the political maneuverings of electioneering." "It was the major instance," Gibbons notes, "in which Secretary Benson placed pragmatism ahead of his farming philosophy while he served as secretary of agriculture. He was always apologetic in mentioning it." Gibbons, *Benson*, 203.

191. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 139.

192. Ibid., 158.

193. Ibid., 158–59.

194. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 280.

195. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 161–62.

196. Ibid., 163.

197. "Never had I known a legislative process to be so indicative of political expediency and so devoid of principle," he recalled. *Cross Fire*, 313; for thoughts of resigning, see 317.

198. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 163. "It was probably the worst piece of farm legislation ever approved by either House of Congress," Benson added. *Cross Fire*, 313; see also 318–20. "I don't very often go against my staff," Benson later quoted Eisenhower as saying. "In this case the staff is wrong and the secretary is right." Benson, Oral History, 20.

199. Eisenhower quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 169.

200. Ibid., 170. Fred Babbel thought the Soil Bank during its first year could be administered for $500,000, rather than the $20 million some Agriculture staffers proposed. His reduced appropriation created "quite a storm in the department amongst people who had planned in terms of their careers and so forth to take advantage of this very excellent opportunity." Benson had warned that, if difficulties ensued, Babbel might have to resign. Three weeks later, Babbel left the department voluntarily. Babbel, Oral History, 156–65.

201. Annoyed to learn that the biggest beneficiaries of the acreage payments were large farming operations, Eisenhower tried unsuccessfully to impose limits. Ambrose, *Eisenhower,* 496.

202. "While he was anything but a political pragmatist," Benson's authorized biographer writes, "the Secretary was learning that, at times, half a legislative loaf was better than none." Dew, *Benson*, 316.

203. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 321. "He [Eisenhower] told me after that he regretted it," Benson later said, "that it was a mistake so far as agriculture was concerned. That's the only time I can recall when he went contrary to my counsel on a matter of agriculture." Benson, Oral History, 14.

During this same period, Benson was also "sick at heart" with the administration's response to the anti-Communist uprising in Hungary. Hoping for more militant intervention, he had to be content with helping to draft an official statement condemning "the moral infamy of the Soviet government." "No project that I helped initiate outside agriculture gave me more satisfaction," he remembered. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 337–40. "I confess," he reported some twenty years later, "I was ashamed of the feeble response of this great nation—a nation which the Lord intended to be an ensign of freedom to all others. Freedom did not die that day—October 23, 1956—for Hungary alone. Hope died for many in other captive nations. . . . As a nation, we act as though we are afraid to offend the devil." Benson, "Some Personal Recollections on the Struggle for Freedom in the 20th Century—Part 1," 4, June 2, 1978, photocopy courtesy of the Smith-Pettit Foundation.

204. Benson interjected himself into Utah politics that same year when he endorsed George Dewey Clyde, Republican candidate for governor. Clyde, a Mormon, defeated J. Bracken Lee, a non-Mormon, by 8,000 votes.

Twelve years earlier, Benson had backed Lee's unsuccessful candidacy for governor. Dennis L. Lythgoe, *Let 'Em Holler: A Political Biography of J. Bracken Lee* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1982), 24, 208–9.

205. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 174–75. A late-term effort to publicize the positive aspects of Benson's views appeared in October 1956 in Benson, *Farmers at the Crossroads,* and in the twenty-four-page summary (also titled *Farmers at the Crossroads)* published by the Constitution and Free Enterprise Foundation (1956).

206. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 176–77.

207. "People at home and abroad are blessed by your re-election," McKay wired. Diary, November 7, 1956.

208. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Benson*, 177.

209. Ibid., 179.