

# “Weak-Kneed Republicans and Socialist Democrats”: Ezra Taft Benson as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, 1953–61, Part 2

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*My hide is no thicker than anyone else's, and I do not like to fight continuously.—Ezra Taft Benson<sup>1</sup>*

## I

Any discussion of Ezra Taft Benson's eight years as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture must include mention of his family, especially his wife, Flora, and his oldest son Reed, whom he credited as his most valued advisers. “It was Flora's ideas and courage—her positive influence and determination—more than anything else,” Benson wrote in 1962, “which added steel to my spine to fight it out for principle against the nearly overwhelming pressures of political expediency.” Second only to Flora was Reed, twenty-four in late 1952, who, according to Benson, understood “more fully what I was trying to accomplish possibly better than anyone else. . . . He worked quietly and effectively behind the scenes on matters that were often of the utmost importance.”<sup>2</sup> Benson's wife and children not only provided love and support but also emerged in the national media as the public face of an idealized mid-twentieth-century American family—white, privileged, patriotic, with mother as homemaker, father as breadwinner, surrounded by attractive, well-mannered offspring.<sup>3</sup>

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Long before Benson's cabinet appointment, Flora Amussen Benson (born July 1, 1901) had willingly embraced "a woman's prime responsibility," in her husband's words, "of dedicated, loving devotion to her children, home, husband and church" and thus was best prepared to avoid the seductive "worldly lure of a glamorized Washington."<sup>4</sup> More often than not, she "played the role of both mother and father and many a night," Benson wrote, "long after I had retired to bed, she stayed up counseling with the children and slipping notes into my briefcase which would help in my work."<sup>5</sup> "I can't remember a time when I came home and didn't find her there," he later elaborated. "She would meet me at the door with a smile and an embrace. It was that love and support that sustained me during my years in Washington when I was constantly under fire."<sup>6</sup>

In 1946, the couple had lived apart for nearly a year while Benson tended to LDS needs in post-World War II Europe. The separation had been painful for both. Facing a similar prospect in late 1952, they decided to relocate the family—including the three children still at home: Beverly (fifteen), Bonnie (twelve), and Beth (eight)—from Salt Lake City to Washington, D.C., after the children's school ended in June 1953. (At the time, Reed was an Air Force chaplain in Texas;<sup>7</sup> Mark, twenty-three and newly married, was a graduate student at Stanford University;<sup>8</sup> and Barbara, nineteen that summer, attended college in Utah.<sup>9</sup>) Benson found temporary quarters in Washington in early 1953, leaving Flora to shoulder over the next five months "the responsibility of selling our home and moving East."<sup>10</sup>

The family's preparations were temporarily halted in early March 1953, when Flora and Barbara were in an automobile accident that totaled the family car. Flora was left unconscious for a time; Barbara suffered a broken shoulder as well as cuts and bruises. Told there was nothing he could do, Benson reluctantly agreed to remain in Washington. As he struggled to concentrate on work, his mind easily drifted, he later recalled, constantly "running over the years of our life together."<sup>11</sup> After praying and fasting for much of the day, he was relieved to learn late that same night that Flora had regained consciousness, was recovering, and had not broken any bones. "It was the longest night and day I spent in Washington," he remembered.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the family arrived in the nation's capital that summer, Benson admitted, "it was none too soon." A few months earlier, after oldest daughter Barbara had spent more than a week with her father, one of

Benson's staff had told him, "You've no idea . . . how much easier it's been to get along with you since Barbara's been here."<sup>13</sup> Flora, too, had visited Washington in late March to look for a new house while recuperating from the car accident and had quickly settled on a modest-sized home on Quincy Street in the tony Rock Creek Park neighborhood some fifteen minutes north of downtown Washington. By mid-June 1953, the family had purchased a new car (following a customary family council), a fire-engine red Studebaker Champion, packed their possessions, been feted at a farewell reception attended by some 600 neighbors and well-wishers, and on June 15 boarded an airplane for the East Coast. They quickly remodeled the basement of their new home, adding an office for Benson, and in late July, despite the heat, tested a new fireplace.<sup>14</sup>

Life in Washington, D.C., especially for the children, required some adjustment. Bonnie, in junior high school, tried not to tell classmates what her father's occupation was, hoping to avoid the uncomfortable, unwanted attention.<sup>15</sup> Being chauffeured to and from school in the Department of Agriculture's official black Cadillac proved to be particularly chafing. Barbara "not only didn't like it; she detested it," Benson wrote. "Several times Barbara, who was eighteen, shed tears when upset over being stared at and required to ride in the limousine. . . . 'Daddy,' she said, 'you *know* we can't afford such a car. People will surely misjudge us and I don't think it's right.'"<sup>16</sup>

Although often absent from home,<sup>17</sup> Benson spent as many Wednesday evenings as he could with his family. He also found time for family vacations and sometimes invited family members to join him on government-related tours.<sup>18</sup> He enjoyed teasing his children, who found the concoction disgusting, by dressing one of his favorite foods—whole wheat bread, topped with honey and drenched in a bowl of milk—with chopped raw onions. And, in keeping with LDS guidelines, he committed the family not to take part in "secular activities on Sunday, except in an emergency, or, as we put it, to free the ox in the mire."<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, the special periodic "luncheons" hosted by cabinet members' wives were held during the week. When it was Flora's turn in May 1954, she jumped at the opportunity "to show that it's possible to uphold the standards of the Church and have a wonderful time, too." A conscientious Mormon homemaker, Flora informed her important guests that there would be no wine or alcohol, no playing cards, no tea or coffee, and no smoking. "But," she promised, "we'll try to make it up to you in our own way."

There followed cocktails of ginger ale and apricot juice, a program of family singing, musical presentations, poetry readings (including Reed's recitation of Wordsworth's "Character of the Happy Warrior" in honor of President Eisenhower), and dancing. BYU's thirty-five Madrigal Singers, in town for a concert, also performed. Afterwards, Mamie Eisenhower, the president's wife, told Flora: "The atmosphere of peace and love abiding within made all of us come away with a deep feeling of joy."<sup>20</sup> "The most exciting part," Flora remembered, "was the beautiful letters we received afterward from the women, telling us what a thrill it was to experience a touch of 'Mormonism' and family cooperation and what wonderful youth the BYU singers were."<sup>21</sup>

More public attention followed. Sometime after the cabinet wives' luncheon, nationally prominent newsman Edward R. Murrow invited Benson to appear on his CBS television program *Person to Person*. Flora immediately objected, fearing the intrusion, but Reed "saw an opportunity" to showcase the "Benson Home Family Night" and LDS values. Flora remained skeptical: "If you insist on the show, have it down at your office. Leave the children out of it."<sup>22</sup> However, Reed persisted, and eventually managed to persuade his mother, who decided to "thr[o]w all her energies into it." Flora later explained, "Our son convinced me that we wouldn't be exposing the family to the nation, but that we would be exposing the nation to the gospel. . . . They [Reed and others] knew the magic words, so I agreed to do the show."<sup>23</sup>

Scheduled for Friday evening, September 24, 1954, the live program was designed to "give the TV audience a picture of a Mormon home and family, distinguished by Mormon standards and ideals." The entire Benson family staged a one-time practice run,<sup>24</sup> then, with three cameras rolling, Flora spoke on the importance of the home, the girls formed a singing quartet, Barbara sang a solo while Beverly accompanied on piano, and Beth tap-danced. Reed and Mark talked about the Church's missionary and other outreach programs. Afterwards, according to Benson, Murrow said "he considered it the best show he had done to date." *Look* magazine commented that it "was much more entertaining than most calls on show-business celebrities." President Eisenhower even opined, pragmatically: "Ezra, . . . it was the best political show you could have put on."<sup>25</sup> The following year, Flora was named national "Home Maker of the Year."<sup>26</sup> Later, Flora commented that helping her husband "meant plenty of hard work and sacrifice on my part. I have long felt that the woman's

role in life was to raise righteous children, to make a haven of love and goodness and to encourage her husband to do well in his church, civic, and professional work.”<sup>27</sup>

The Benson family’s partisan political acumen—particularly Reed’s and Flora’s—also went on public display during the 1956 general elections. That March, when Benson was unable to address the National Republican Women’s Convention, Reed, now discharged from the Air Force, substituted. Thereafter, according to Benson, the articulate, charismatic Reed “came in great demand as a speaker at Republican conclaves.”<sup>28</sup> Employed by the Republican National Committee, Reed acted as his father’s companion on the campaign trail, helped draft Benson’s political speeches, and arranged press conferences. That year, Reed traveled some 100,000 miles, visiting nearly forty states. “If he sensed a crisis,” Benson proudly wrote, “he would drop everything, jeopardizing his own future career and schoolwork to help.”<sup>29</sup>

Though more reserved, Flora could be equally formidable. Addressing some 1,000 Republican women in April 1956, she reported, disarmingly, “We may live in Washington now, but I don’t have a maid. And when Mamie Eisenhower comes for dinner the girls and I pitch in and cook it. I guess I’ve just raised all my girls to marry poor men. . . . When we women see things that are wrong, we must not just shake our heads. We must speak up. We are men’s helpmates—not just silent partners.”<sup>30</sup> Afterward, an observer quipped that Eisenhower should “get the [Benson] family a maid, and send Mrs. Benson out in the nation to preach the gospel for the Republican farm program.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the accolades, Flora did not like the raucous free-for-all of electioneering and tended to decline many—though not all—politically oriented speaking invitations. She “was very serious about her job as mother,” Benson explained.<sup>32</sup>

Following her husband’s resignation in 1961, Flora outlined to members of an LDS congregation some of her and her family’s response to life in the Capitol:

We felt as a family in all we did and said that we were representing you and our religion. This was a great responsibility on our shoulders. People watch so closely and critically if a slip is ever made and especially being known in the public eye as we were because of the high positions we held in both Church and government. . . .

Politics can be almost brutal and vicious at times with its misinterpretations of one[']s statements and the twisting of them—often misquoting and giving half truths. But never did we let this thwart our efforts in doing

our best in helping to keep America strong and free. Our family had many a cry and heartaches with fasting and earnest prayer, but the rewarding and sunny days came often in our dealings with the government and people, knowing we had been honest in our efforts and could face anyone on these grounds. . . .

I was trying to do all the jobs of a good homemaker, cooking, laundress, cleaning woman, nurse, counselor, time with my children, and at the end of the day look rested, poised, relaxed and properly groomed for a formal dinner or social engagement of some kind. . . . I was to look like a charming girl, think like a man, work like a dog and act like a lady.<sup>33</sup>

“I never realized it until later,” Benson confessed in 1962 after leaving office, “but I know now that having Flora and the family nearby gave me new confidence in doing my job. I became more decisive, surer of myself, more willing to tackle the tough challenges. For years I had depended on her counsel and wise judgment to supplement my own thinking. In a good marriage that is inevitable. Husband and wife share their thoughts, and their desires, their problems, their joys and sorrows, until their unity is such that it’s hard to tell where one person leaves off and the other begins.”<sup>34</sup>

## II

As Benson began his second term as Secretary of Agriculture in early 1957, he faced the continuing, seemingly insoluble problem of mounting commodity—specifically, wheat—surpluses. The Soil Bank required significantly large monetary appropriations but in actual practice did little to address the problem of over-production, especially by smaller farmers. In fact, of the \$3.3 billion allocated for the Soil Bank that year, the “lion’s share” went to 1.3 million farmers who each received an average of \$2,000 annually, while 2.7 million smaller farmers received only \$100 each.<sup>35</sup> Because of an “explosion” in agriculture-related technology, farmers were producing more than ever before. Not surprisingly, Benson was even more convinced that the only effective answer to surpluses was flexible-to-no federal price supports and a truly *laissez-faire* free-market economy where demand and supply set prices. What he most wanted, according to his biographers, was a “reorientation of thinking and basic legislative reforms,” including the “elimination of all restraints on freedom of choice or free play of the market place in determining commodity prices.”<sup>36</sup> “If we continue to bring the Federal Government into more and more areas wherever a need for improvement exists,” he reasoned,

“where are we going to draw the line? What is to be left to state and local initiative?”<sup>37</sup>

In April 1957, Benson decided, in an effort to rein-in over-production, to allot some 55 million acres for wheat and to lower parity to 75 percent. (“Riding a wave of confidence” from Eisenhower’s reelection, Benson hoped “it would carry us.”<sup>38</sup>) Thus, farmers who had been receiving \$2.00 per bushel of wheat would now get \$1.78. Benson concluded that “this move would force farmers to make economically sound decisions regarding how much they would plant or whether they would even put the plow to some of their land.”<sup>39</sup> South Dakota’s Democratic Representative George McGovern, among others, immediately protested that Benson was “totally out of sympathy with the economically depressed conditions of farm families” and, for the good of the country, should leave office immediately.<sup>40</sup> “It was almost standard fare for Democratic congressmen from farm states to sharpen their teeth on Mr. Benson,” McGovern later recalled. “We ate a piece of him for breakfast every morning.”<sup>41</sup>

Benson had grown weary of such attacks and once again began to feel “the urge . . . to go back to my life’s work in Utah.” When he raised the subject with Eisenhower, the president remained firmly opposed to Benson’s departure: “If I have to, I’ll go to Salt Lake City and appeal to President [David O.] McKay to have you stay on with me,” he vowed. Both disappointed and exasperated, Benson “threw up my hands,” confessing, “This is a difficult assignment and I’d be genuinely happy to be out of it. But I have no disposition to run out on you if you feel I’m serving a useful purpose. But I want to say again that if at any time I seem to you to be following a course not in the best interests o[f] your Administration, you have only to pick up the telephone.”<sup>42</sup>

Less than two months later, Democrat William Proxmire’s surprise victory in Wisconsin to fill the seat of recently deceased Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican, gave Democrats reason to believe—and Republicans reason to worry—that the unexpected win was a clear “repudiation of the Eisenhower-Benson farm program.”<sup>43</sup> Proxmire and House colleague Henry Reuss soon joined McGovern’s call for Benson’s ouster. Almost immediately, some nervous Republicans began to look to Benson as a convenient scapegoat. Congressman Melvin R. Laird, also from Wisconsin, told Eisenhower: “It is most important that a change be made in the office of Secretary of Agriculture before the next session of Congress.” South Dakota Senator Karl Mundt, another Republican, wrote: “We can-

not even come close to electing a Republican House of Representatives or a Republican Senate in 1958 unless . . . Benson is replaced by somebody who is personally acceptable to the farmers of this country.” With Benson remaining in office, Mundt insisted, Republicans did not have a “Chinaman’s chance of winning the farm vote.”<sup>44</sup> Benson’s critics—an “avalanche,” according to his biographers—“hoped that [Benson’s] dismissal would defuse the situation for the benefit of them all.”<sup>45</sup> About this same time, a small handful of angry South Dakota farmers tossed raw eggs at Benson during the secretary’s tour through the state. “The eggs didn’t come close to me,” Benson reported, “and were apparently thrown by what one might call ‘pool-hall farmers’ (persons who spend more time in loafing about town than they do on the farm).”<sup>46</sup> Most local citizens condemned the protest even as they continued to denounce Benson’s seemingly draconian policies.<sup>47</sup>

Shortly after Proxmire’s win, President David O. McKay paid a surprise visit to Eisenhower in early September 1957. According to Benson, McKay was “planning some changes in which I might well have a part” and wondered if it “would be convenient for him [Eisenhower] to release me at this time.” (McKay subsequently admitted that he wanted to provide Eisenhower with an “excuse to release Brother Benson if he desired to do so.”)<sup>48</sup> As Benson remembered:

President McKay said, “Mr. Eisenhower indicated to me that you [i.e., Benson] and he have been very close. In fact, the President told me ‘Ezra and I have been just like this’—and he interlocked the fingers of his hands.

“Then he said, ‘I just don’t know where I could turn to get someone to succeed him.’

“Now Brother Benson,” President McKay went on, “I left no doubt but that the government and President Eisenhower have first call on your services. We in the Church can make adjustments easier at this time than the government can. We want to support President Eisenhower. He is a noble character, a fine man. In this case our country comes first. But, of course, we also want you to do what you would prefer.”

Benson conferred with Flora, who also “would have liked us to return to Utah.” The couple agreed, however, that Benson would speak with Eisenhower but “leave the final decision to President McKay.” “I recognize that you have had more than four very strenuous years in Washington,” Eisenhower told Benson, “and I can appreciate that your Church is anxious to have you back. I have given this a great deal of thought, and I will not go contrary to the wishes of your Church if they feel it imperative

that you should leave. But I want to emphasize that word imperative.” Informed of McKay’s position, Eisenhower continued:

“I feel, Ezra,” he said, “that if you leave now it may mean giving up much of the agricultural program which we’ve put in operation and are trying to push to completion. I wish very much that you would stay at least one more year. Next fall [1958] we can review the situation again. At that time if changes in the Church occur or other conditions demand that you go back to Utah, I’ll no longer stand in your way. But, if not, then I would like you to stay”—and here the President smiled—“stay to the bitter end.”

I smiled back. “Do you think the end will be bitter?”

“Not one bit,” he said. “Just wait and see.”

Benson telephoned McKay the next day. “Please tell President Eisenhower,” McKay replied, “that we want to help him in every way possible.”<sup>49</sup>

With Eisenhower’s—and especially McKay’s—support, Benson tried to ignore his detractors, embarking that fall upon another overseas trade mission—a task he considered to be “more productive in solving farm problems” than lobbying Congress. Traveling from Hawaii to Japan and China, then to Pakistan, Jordan, and Israel, and on to Greece, Italy,<sup>50</sup> Spain, Portugal, France, and England, Benson—accompanied for part of the route by Flora, Beverly, and Bonnie—“probed every avenue for new outlets.”<sup>51</sup> He also regularly touched bases with local LDS congregations “to help the Cause.”<sup>52</sup> “Nothing is better calculated to impress a man with the great drama of human existence,” he believed, “than seeing for himself the varying conditions of the world’s people—how they make their living—their struggle for existence and, after this is somewhat assured, for cultural and spiritual development—their unremitting search for a place of their own, not only a territorial home but a place in the society in which they live.”<sup>53</sup>

Returning home to Washington, he found to his dismay that congressional dissatisfaction with his policies had not subsided. “What you say may be true,” he remembered being lectured, “but then YOU don’t have to be elected.”<sup>54</sup> Rumors circulated that ranking LDS leaders “wanted to get me off the political firing line where, they said, I had become an impediment to the Church’s mission.” Enduring many sleepless nights, Benson could not help wondering: “Was I a liability to the President and my party after all?”; and “Was it plain stubbornness that made me reluctant to quit?” With the support of friends and colleagues, how-

ever, he resolved to remain in office where he would “continue to tell the truth,” as he saw it.<sup>55</sup>

Early the next year, when another special election nearly resulted in a Democratic victory in the House, a group of some thirty Republicans renewed calls for Benson’s resignation.<sup>56</sup> Once again feeling “very downhearted,” he asked that the First Presidency and Twelve Apostles remember him in their collective prayers. McKay promised that if Benson continued “to stand for his principles . . . things would come out all right.”<sup>57</sup> Thus emboldened, Benson made a public statement: “I have responsibilities which I take seriously. As long as God gives me the strength I shall continue to do all within my power to help our farmers through this severe struggle to a better and brighter future.” “When we find a man of this dedication and personal honesty,” Eisenhower, ever-loyal, agreed, “we should say to ourselves, ‘We just don’t believe that America has come to the point where it wants to dispense with the advice of that kind of a person.’”<sup>58</sup> “I have never thought of [Benson] as a political millstone or as a political asset,” Eisenhower also explained. “I have thought of him as this: One of the finest, most dedicated public servants I have ever known, a man who is thoroughly acquainted with every piece of agriculture, and puts his whole heart into doing something that he believes will be good for the long term benefit of the farmers of America.”<sup>59</sup>

Benson quickly focused on a new farm-related legislative agenda. Among other items, he hoped to persuade Congress to strengthen the Soil Bank, terminate the acreage reserve program and eliminate acreage allotments for corn, increase acreage allotments for certain other commodities, further lower the floor for parity payments, extend trade opportunities, and expand industrial uses for crops. Eisenhower added his own set of priorities. When finally submitted in January 1958, the Food and Fiber Bill “signaled a movement away from land retirement and a return to flexibility” in federal price supports.<sup>60</sup> In an election year, lowering parity to 60 percent—when the previous floor had been 75 percent—was the bill’s most problematic provision. Republican leaders wanted to emphasize the strengths of Benson’s department and suggested, in part, that he “consider inviting a top-level, highly confidential panel of public relations experts, skilled in the farm problem, to meet with him at intervals of at least once a month (and oftener, if possible) to evaluate the manner in which the administration’s story is getting through to the voters.” Furthermore, if he “does not now have a top public relations man in his own De-

partment, one should be obtained at the earliest possible time.”<sup>61</sup> Benson bristled at the suggestion that he was unskilled in public relations but agreed that the party needed to tackle the “misinformation and untruths” leveled against the administration by special-interest groups.<sup>62</sup>

In Congress, both houses rejected the 60 percent parity proposal and voted to freeze parity at current levels, thereby postponing any movement downward (though the House of Representatives called for a one-year freeze only). “Thoroughly disgusted,” Benson “ripped into Congress,” taking them “to task for their attempt to hamper the transition to a more flexible system of price supports.”<sup>63</sup> “This was more than near-sighted,” he insisted. “It was cross-eyed.”<sup>64</sup> Benson also hinted, correctly, that Eisenhower would veto the joint resolution.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently explaining his rejection of the bill, Eisenhower asserted: “It would have been a 180-degree turn—right back to the very problems from which our farm people are beginning to escape.”<sup>66</sup> Privately, however, Eisenhower had hoped to avoid such a show-down and delivered a “mild spanking” to Benson for his “advanced positions of inflexibility.” Eisenhower’s “little treatise,” Benson remembered, “was so obviously well intended, I could not resent his giving it.”<sup>67</sup>

Eisenhower’s veto prevailed, and Democrats countered with a bill that would have “sidetracked” the administration. Benson dismissed the move, which was defeated in the House of Representatives, as an “economic monstrosity and a political hodgepodge.”<sup>68</sup> Benson’s and Eisenhower’s partnership succeeded in “forc[ing] GOP dissidents to work out a compromise acceptable to administration backers.” And Democrats, convinced of mid-term victories, decided to bide their time until after the elections.<sup>69</sup> As eventually signed into law, the 1958 Agriculture Act set a floor for parity at 65 percent (not 60); froze acreage allotments for cotton and rice; mandated price supports for feed grains; and allowed farmers to decide if they wanted restrictions on corn production. Benson thought the compromise, in general, was a positive step and looked especially to farmer-oriented cooperatives to replace much of government’s role in agriculture.<sup>70</sup> Other observers saw the compromise as a Republican victory, as tangible evidence of Benson’s “remarkable political comeback,” and now credited the Agriculture Secretary with being “the most influential member of the Eisenhower Cabinet.”<sup>71</sup> Benson, however, had to remind himself: “Ezra, be careful—be very very careful. The higher you go on the applause machine the farther you can fall.”<sup>72</sup>

Campaigning—or, as he preferred, “farm-storming”<sup>73</sup>—that fall, Benson was upbeat. The choice, he thought, was both clear and simple: “a return to price fixers and the forces of regimentation, or a program under Republican leadership aimed at an expanding, prosperous, and free economy under the free enterprise system. . . . We had to reject the proposition that an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful government was the panacea for our problems. Nothing was ever so wrong.”<sup>74</sup> In Nebraska, he “admitted forthrightly that farmers were not sharing fully in the national prosperity,” but insisted optimistically that they “could prosper if [they] modernized and adjusted to the new economic milieu.”<sup>75</sup> “The government cannot guarantee all farmers a fixed level of income any more than government can guarantee every businessman a profit or every worker a high annual wage,” he told Californians, “or every doctor so many patients, or every manufacturer so many customers.”<sup>76</sup> In Arizona, he championed the reelection of Senator Barry Goldwater, a like-minded Republican conservative: “This nation will soon decide whether it shall have a truly American or a left-wing dominated Congress for the next two critical years,” Benson told enthusiastic crowds.<sup>77</sup>

But when the polls closed in early November, despite his Herculean efforts,<sup>78</sup> Benson had misjudged the voters’ resentment and was heartsick at the election “disaster.”<sup>79</sup> Republicans lost forty-seven House races (twenty-three of which were Midwestern), and thirteen in the Senate. Democrats won across the board. Beginning his last two years in office, Benson realized to his chagrin that he now faced “more resistance—not increased receptivity—to his agricultural policies.”<sup>80</sup>

### III

Conceding “we had been licked and licked bad” in 1958,<sup>81</sup> Benson—as “undaunted” and “intractable” as ever—determined to see his party’s defeat as an opportunity “to bring into focus the principles for which we stand.”<sup>82</sup> “With every bit of strength and influence I possessed,” he later recalled, “I was resolved to buck the rising trend toward politics first.”<sup>83</sup> After a particularly disturbing cabinet meeting in June 1960, during which Benson felt he had stood alone in supporting Eisenhower’s call for fiscal restraint, Benson fretted: “I could not but fear for the future of our country unless influential voices were raised in crescendo, calling not only for a halt but a reversal of this trend.”<sup>84</sup> In fact, some hard-line conservatives, especially in the Republican Party, had al-

ready begun to view Benson as a spokesperson for concerns they (and, to a growing degree, he) believed were being ignored by party elite. Knowing that his chances for legislative success in a Democratically controlled Congress were small—"like trying to move the ball against a team that outweighed us 50 pounds to the man," he quipped<sup>85</sup>—Benson found his political voice expanding beyond farming issues as concerned conservatives began actively seeking his opinions on a wide range of hot-button public policy topics.<sup>86</sup>

Much to his surprise, and satisfaction, Benson also discovered a groundswell—minor but vocal—urging his candidacy for national elected office. (Rumors were even reaching the ears of David O. McKay.<sup>87</sup>) Insisting that the "thought of running for elective office has never tempted me," Benson nonetheless recognized the value of a national pulpit from which to advocate the godly values he had long cherished, specifically the "freedom to make [one's] own decisions—and learn from the consequences, good or ill."<sup>88</sup> He rejected the argument that personal security trumps freedom of choice, championed free enterprise as the foundation of any political philosophy, and believed in limited federal intervention in the lives of citizens. In fact, his biographers suggest, Benson's "advocacy of more local democracy and less centralized government appealed also to the Jeffersonian tradition within the Democratic party."<sup>89</sup>

Speaking as much to future prospects as to present realities, Benson continued to push throughout 1958 and into 1959 for the eventual elimination of all federal agricultural subsidies and supports—a goal, his biographers point out, "as courageous as it was futile."<sup>90</sup> He was convinced that "further changing the parity base and eliminating all acreage allotments would check overproduction and materially reduce government expenditures." He wanted a "termination of government's managerial role, with its corollary of unenforceable controls, so that the perennial wheat problem could at long last be solved."<sup>91</sup> He managed to convince Eisenhower to agree to relax some federal budgetary prohibitions and to push for additional public monies for the Soil Bank's Conservation Reserve program. Democrats, however, submitted a 1959 farm bill—another "monstrosity," according to Benson<sup>92</sup>—that called for a reduction in acreage allotments and an increase in parity to 90 percent. Eisenhower vetoed the proposed legislation, and a stalemate followed which lasted the remainder of both men's terms in office.<sup>93</sup> "Stymied" was how Benson described the impasse.<sup>94</sup>

In tandem with the president's veto, Benson departed on another trade-related mission to Europe, including Switzerland, Germany, and Denmark. "I wanted to go for many reasons," he remembered, "not the least important being the desire to say some things on European soil about freedom and human dignity and American ideals."<sup>95</sup> Not quite three months later, he returned to the Continent for two-plus weeks in Yugoslavia, West Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union, Finland, Sweden, and Norway.<sup>96</sup> Shortly before this second departure, he reluctantly played host to Nikita S. Khrushchev during a portion of the larger-than-life Russian leader's mid-September 1959 trip to the United States. "I must say," Benson later wrote, not mincing his words, "my enthusiasm for the project could have been put in a small thimble. By my lights, Khrushchev was, and is, an evil man. He has about as much conception of moral right and wrong as a jungle animal."<sup>97</sup> Following a tour of the federal government's 11,000-acre agricultural research facility in Maryland, during which Benson lectured the Soviet prime minister for an hour and forty minutes on the virtues of free enterprise, Benson concluded that the experience had been "far from satisfying to me personally. . . . Even if I had wanted to, I could not possibly have warmed up to the Russian leader. That was the last time I saw Khrushchev at close range."<sup>98</sup> ("I still feel it was a mistake," he added some twenty years later, "to invite this godless despot as a state visitor. To this day I get an uneasy feeling when I think of that experience."<sup>99</sup>)

For Benson's politically attuned oldest son, Reed, the Russian leader's official state visit put him in a special "quandary." Long counseled to "avoid the company of evil men," he decided that "if the opportunity presented itself, he would give the Khrushchev party what he considered the greatest message in the world . . . the gospel of Jesus Christ." Finding himself returning to Washington in the same car as the Khrushchevs, Reed, who felt convinced that the encounter was "not coincidental," told the guests that "long after communism has faded away the Church of Jesus Christ would stand triumphant." Thereafter, according to his father, for "over 45 minutes Reed kindly but firmly spelled out the basic tenets of Mormonism as first one and then another asked questions and sometimes tried to rebut him." "It was good to have a communist captive audience that couldn't walk out on me," Reed later quipped. "The car was going too fast for that." "Knowing full well that communists are violators of the moral law," his father predicted, "yet it is my faith that in the Lord's

due time He will find a way to break down this murderous conspiracy and bring the truth and liberty to those Russians who are honest in heart. Somehow I felt that Providence might use men of courage and conviction—such as Reed displayed—to bring this about.”<sup>100</sup>

Secretary Benson’s subsequent visit late that same month and into October to, among other European countries, the Soviet Union made a profound and lasting impact upon him. “Of all the trade trips,” he later wrote, “this one left the deepest imprint on me . . . because it put before my eyes the pitiful faces of a people enslaved and into my ears the mournful cry of those bemoaning their lost liberty.”<sup>101</sup> Accompanied by Flora, Beverly, and Bonnie (as well as several Department of Agriculture staff), Benson scrutinized Soviet-style collective farming and returned home more persuaded than ever of the “superiority of our agricultural system of privately owned family farms, the profit motive, competitive markets, and freedom for the farmer to decide what he wants to grow and market.”<sup>102</sup> Benson believed that the Soviet government—which he characterized as “godless, murderous, cold and forbidding”<sup>103</sup>—was intent on trying to outperform the United States on the world stage. Despite any thawing in the Cold War that Eisenhower’s own recent talks with Khrushchev may have produced, Benson was adamant that “the basic Communist ideology and strategic objectives of world domination for Communism remained the same.”<sup>104</sup> (“The vast number of Russian people, I believe, are fine,” he was quick to point out. “It is the Communist system and its leaders that are evil.”<sup>105</sup>)

Most memorably, Benson arranged to attend, and then was invited to address, a Thursday evening meeting of some 1,500 members of Moscow’s Central Baptist Church. He clearly hoped to reassure his listeners—mostly older women—that there was more to life than the sufferings they were then forced to endure: “We will live again after we leave this life. Christ broke the bonds of death and was resurrected. We will all be resurrected.”<sup>106</sup> “I don’t remember all that I said,” he later wrote, “but I recall feeling lifted up, inspired by the rapt faces of these men and women who were so steadfastly proving their faith in the God they served and loved.”<sup>107</sup> As his party left the building, the large crowd began to sing in Russian the Congregational hymn “God Be with You ’Til We Meet Again.” It was an emotionally exhilarating, defining, yet devastating, experience. “Never shall I forget this victory of the spirit over tyranny, oppres-

sion, and ignorance,” he promised. “Never can I doubt the ultimate deliverance of the Russian people.”<sup>108</sup>

Benson’s euphoria did not last long. Arriving home, he was met with renewed calls for his removal from office.<sup>109</sup> More immediately, however, he also had to contend with growing stomach pain. At first, he minimized the symptoms as the result of work-related stress. But when the pain became especially severe, he checked into Walter Reed Hospital where, and on December 4, 1959, his inflamed gall bladder was removed. Ten days later, and some twenty-five pounds lighter, Benson was back at work.<sup>110</sup>

As much as he wanted to push through his farm agenda, Benson knew that any likelihood of success was rapidly diminishing. He not only faced a hostile Congress, but Eisenhower was intent on cutting the federal budget and seemed disinterested “in propositions to enlarge existing programs.”<sup>111</sup> “I could hardly be hopeful,” Benson wrote; “yet if we failed, I had to make sure the fault could not justly be laid at our door.”<sup>112</sup> He also found himself reflecting on recent experiences: “How can free government best endure in this competition with the atheistic communistic system? . . . One thing seemed all too clear to me. We could not do it by trying to provide through government action too many services to too many people too fast and at the price of living beyond our means.”<sup>113</sup> Benson subsequently backed the idea of donating surplus food abroad to needy countries in a program called Food for Peace. “We are making our God-given bounty available to the less fortunate,” he explained, “not in the spirit of a wasteful give-away but rather in the spirit of genuine helpfulness.”<sup>114</sup> “A farmer who knows that his wheat is going abroad, to meet human need, as part of the foreign policy of the United States,” Vice President Richard M. Nixon agreed, “is likely to be happier than a farmer who is told that his wheat is simply creating a storage problem for the United States government.”<sup>115</sup>

Eisenhower’s 1960 farm message—his last—was both “modest and moderate.”<sup>116</sup> He did not seek larger appropriations for existing programs, but merely asked that the Conservation Reserve be expanded to 60 million acres, with payments offered in produce, if farmers so desired. And he was in no mood to fight: “If the Congress wishes to propose a plan as an alternative to the course here recommended, so long as that plan is constructive, . . . I will approve it.”<sup>117</sup> Benson thought he could convince congressional lawmakers to abandon acreage allotments for wheat espe-

cially and reduce parity to 75 percent. "It doesn't make sense to me," he argued, that wheat farmers "should be deprived of productive and economic wealth by unsound farm programs that lose markets and depress prices through imbalance of natural production."<sup>118</sup>

Generally oblivious to—or unwilling to acknowledge—his own public-relations shortcomings and sometimes obdurate personality, Benson sincerely believed that he had only the best interests of America's farmers at heart and thus was convinced he had long been the hapless victim of a liberal smear machine. His opponents, he insisted, "have distorted my actions—sought to create a false image of the Secretary of Agriculture [and] . . . have tried to force me out of office."<sup>119</sup> While staunchly affirming that he had grown accustomed to such abuse, he nonetheless "resented the harm it did to effective action." Some in the media may have found it "easier to attack him than to criticize Eisenhower," his biographers explain. "In this sense, Ike was wise in keeping Benson in the cabinet. It kept much vitriol from reaching the White House."<sup>120</sup>

Despite Benson's pleadings, congressmen "refused to expand the Soil Bank's Conservation Reserve and balked at lowering price supports on wheat."<sup>121</sup> Instead, tobacco supports were frozen at 1959 levels, and parity for dairy products was raised from 75 percent to 80 percent. Benson correctly understood that the proposals tended, in part, to reverse his previous seven years' work. But if he thought that Eisenhower would veto the legislation, he was mistaken. Benson interpreted Eisenhower's inaction as evidence of Richard Nixon's ascendancy as their party's putative presidential candidate for 1960. Nixon, Benson feared, was at heart a career politician who "seemed to be more interested in devising a scheme to capture the imagination of the voters, especially in the Midwest, than in supporting the Administration's sound proposals."<sup>122</sup>

After one especially troubled, sleepless night, Benson vented his pent-up frustration in a letter to the vice president which he ultimately decided not to send but, tellingly, included in his published memoirs:

For seven long years my associates and I, in USDA, have fought against great odds, a combination of week-kneed Republicans and socialistic Democrats, to bring some sense into a senseless program for our farmers, especially in the Midwest. . . . Sometimes I'm almost tempted to respond to the suggestions of friends and strangers from all segments of America and get into the presidential free-for-all myself. Not that victory would be possible, but it might present a more effective opportunity to tell the American people something of the politics of agriculture. . . . As President

Ike said to me in 1953, "If a thing is right it should be done. And if it's right it will prove to be good politics." I can only add that if the time ever comes when what is right is not good politics, it will be a sad day for America!<sup>123</sup>

While Nixon agreed with many of Benson's policies, he had deliberately decided to "exert more influence on agricultural affairs so that," Benson's biographers suggest, "he could start his campaign in the farm belt with no political encumbrances."<sup>124</sup> Nixon had to come up with a way to distance himself from Benson, who was seen as a liability, while still advocating much of Benson's program. Thus, Nixon adopted an aggressive, ostensibly independent approach to U.S. farm policy, hoping to sway American farmers.

#### IV

Eisenhower readily admitted Benson's expertise in agricultural issues even as he was forced to acknowledge the secretary's potential liability on the campaign trail. "Many Republicans think that any public appearance by him [Benson] would be a detriment in the Middle West," Eisenhower advised Nixon in early January 1960. "Nevertheless it is possible that he could be used efficiently in the metropolitan areas because his viewpoint is that of the nation and not of the local voters."<sup>125</sup> Agreeing, Nixon "redoubled his efforts to prepare a political scenario geared to soften this issue."<sup>126</sup> For his part, Benson worried that Nixon's politically nuanced approach meant the de facto rejection of Benson's own free-market-driven agenda. "I wish I had more confidence in the Vice-President's ability to provide wise leadership for the nation," he confided to his diary.<sup>127</sup> In fact, Benson's recommendations for the farm plank of the Republican Party's national platform were, early on, dismissed out of hand as too "negative" and "problem-prone." "One doesn't catch flies with vinegar," he was told.<sup>128</sup>

According to Benson's biographers, Nixon and his supporters "tried to put together a farm plank that would for all intents and purposes bypass Ezra Taft Benson without repudiating his farm policy."<sup>129</sup> The problem, as Nixon and others saw it, was Benson's seemingly imperious, autocratic persona. "Some way, somehow, our Democratic friends have done such a good job on Ezra Benson," Nixon commented, "that they have the farmers thinking he and the Republican party are against them. We took the worst shellacking [in 1958] in the farm states."<sup>130</sup> Politically, then, Nixon's strategy was to "put an up-to-date face on his farm policy

while removing Benson as a symbol of controversy in order to placate critics.”<sup>131</sup> This meant “couch[ing] his [Nixon’s] words in a milder, less concrete tone” and “work[ing] more closely with congressional leaders.”<sup>132</sup> Thus, the final version of their party’s farm plank—“to improve and stabilize farm family income”—reflected both “Benson’s policies and Nixon’s rhetoric.”<sup>133</sup>

In their own 1960 national platform, Democrats countered that America’s farmer had the “right” to “raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living.” “We will no longer view food stockpiles with alarm,” they continued, “but will use them as powerful instruments for peace and plenty.” “These goals,” Democrats explained, “demand the leadership of a Secretary of Agriculture who is conversant with the technological and economic aspects of farm problems, and who is sympathetic with the objectives of effective farm legislation not only for farmers but for the best interests of the nation as a whole.”<sup>134</sup> Specifically, Democrats called for “production and marketing quotas . . . at not less than 90 per cent of parity, production payments, commodity purchases, and marketing orders and agreements. . . . We are convinced,” they summarized, “that a successful combination of these approaches will cost considerably less than present Republican programs which have failed.”<sup>135</sup> For Benson, the platform “ranked as the worst . . . drawn up by either major party at any time within my memory.”<sup>136</sup>

Though as Democratic senator from Massachusetts he had tended to support Benson’s policies during the mid-1950s, John F. Kennedy, now Democratic candidate for U.S. president, declared publicly in October 1960: “Mr. Benson is an honest man, but he has not been a successful Secretary of Agriculture. I could not disagree more with the agricultural policy pursued by this administration, which has got for its basis, a steady drop of support prices as a method of eliminating overproduction. . . . My own judgment is for our agricultural program that we should tie support price to parity price.”<sup>137</sup> “Congress did give Mr. Benson’s program a chance,” he also commented, “but Mr. Benson’s program never gave the farmer a chance.”<sup>138</sup>

In attempting to distance himself from Benson, but not entirely disown him, Nixon knew he navigated a very thin line, especially in the Midwest. In his memoirs, he wrote:

The Democrats for eight years had done a vicious hatchet-job on Ezra Taft Benson. They had created the impression, not only among Democratic

farmers but among Republicans as well, that Benson had no sympathy for the farmers and their problems and that his attitude was simply that the farmer should “grin and bear it.” The Republican farm bloc leaders respected him as a man of high principle. Scarcely a one of them had any alternative to offer. But almost to a man they told me—“the farmer has not been getting his fair share of America’s increasing prosperity. He is hurting.” He will not vote for a presidential candidate who says, in effect, “we are doing all we can and things will work out in time.”<sup>139</sup>

At Nixon’s urging, Eisenhower agreed to absent his divisive Secretary of Agriculture from the unfolding political drama by sending him on several trade missions in exchange for which Nixon would not publicly disavow either Benson or his farm policy.

At first, Benson apparently did not comprehend that he was being deliberately sidelined, for he returned from Europe and the Middle East in late August 1960 itching for partisan battle. He publicly charged Kennedy with “flip-flopping” on agriculture, proclaimed the Nixon ticket as “the nation’s best hope,” and even asserted—despite some private misgivings—that Nixon would be a “great and beloved President.”<sup>140</sup> Later that fall, however, when asked to spearhead a second overseas mission, Benson realized that party leaders were intentionally snubbing him. Still, he could not resist one last piece of advice to Nixon: “I feel the time has come for you to hit hard and be tough but be sure you are right. You need to keep emphasizing the basic differences between your philosophy and your opponent’s and by letting the American people know there is a real choice.”<sup>141</sup> “The Vice President’s wavering on the farm question,” Benson later explained, “. . . would have made it difficult for me to support him enthusiastically in partisan political meetings.”<sup>142</sup> Benson then quietly withdrew from active politicking and instead focused on his department affairs; he also quashed an independent drive to try to convince him to run as a candidate for Utah governor.<sup>143</sup>

After leaving office in early 1961, Benson recalled that his relationship with Nixon “went through three phases” during their eight years together. At first, Nixon “impressed me as an extraordinarily energetic, efficient, and ambitious young man.” But after 1956, when Nixon, “the GOP heir apparent,” became an “active candidate” for office, Benson began to harbor “some doubts about his qualifications to become Chief Executive.” By 1960, Benson concluded that Nixon had developed “to a fine art” the “ability, to borrow an FDR phrase, of carrying water on both shoulders.”<sup>144</sup> Benson began to look increasingly to New York’s Republi-

can governor Nelson A. Rockefeller as a preferable alternative and also entertained the possibility of becoming Rockefeller's vice presidential candidate. He was disappointed when Rockefeller announced his withdrawal from the presidential race in late 1959.

At the same time, public interest in Benson's "own political future continued until at last it became a question we could no longer ignore or dismiss out of hand."<sup>145</sup> Raising the subject—including the possibility of attempting a run at the U.S. presidency himself—with family members, Benson initially voiced some modest reluctance, but Reed "in particular employed all his persuasiveness to get me to give the matter further consideration." Finally, he decided to raise the subject directly with David O. McKay.<sup>146</sup> Accompanied by Reed, Benson met with McKay on March 5, 1960, and the two Bensons forcefully presented the case for Benson's continuing engagement with national politics. McKay replied supportively that the "country needed more patriots and real statesmen" and, according to Benson, suggested that "we watch this developing groundswell closely for the next few weeks and that if we did, we should have the answer" by early April.<sup>147</sup>

In a section of Benson's memoirs deleted at McKay's request prior to publication in 1962, McKay continued:

"If it should come to pass," he [McKay] said, "Governor Rockefeller and Brother Benson would be a great team. We are all proud of the way you have stood for principle—but then you had to do this to be true to your own father and [great] grandfather."

Saying it was highly desirable that more than one man should be considered for the presidential nomination in each political party, he went on and indicated he was sorry to see Rockefeller step out of the picture and hoped he could be encouraged to reconsider. President McKay thought it would be appropriate for me to make a statement indicating that the nomination should not go by default to the Vice President. . . .

"I sincerely hope Brother Benson," he said, "That Governor Rockefeller will still be able to get into the race. And I have considered it all carefully and if the opportunity should come unsolicited for you to serve in a high political post you will have the whole-hearted support of all of us."<sup>148</sup>

McKay's own diary recorded of the same meeting:

They [Ezra and Reed Benson] entered into a *two-and-a-half hour discussion with me on national political affairs*, especially on questions pertaining to candidates for the presidency of the United States.

I made no commitments, but advised that they watch the political

trend between [now] and April [General] Conference. Reed then asked the question (having in mind the suggestion that has been made that his father run as a candidate for presidency) if there is anything that he could do or say that there might be other candidates considered besides the Vice President on the Republican ticket. I answered, "You must never mention this—let the political leaders get together and make the suggestion, but do not let it come from you; you may acquiesce, but let them do the suggesting."<sup>149</sup>

Rockefeller did not change his mind and the question of Benson's possible vice presidential or presidential candidacy was soon dropped.<sup>150</sup>

The third phase in Benson's relationship with Nixon began when Nixon was officially nominated by Republicans as their candidate for U.S. president that summer. "He was the choice of my party," Benson remembered, "and I wanted to support him wholeheartedly. I only hoped he would not make it impossible for me to do so."<sup>151</sup>

To almost all—except perhaps Benson himself—the potential drawbacks to Benson's public participation in the 1960 campaign were obvious. A reporter from the *Chicago Daily News* asked Eisenhower on August 10, 1960: "Do you regret having kept Ezra Taft Benson on as Secretary of Agriculture in view of the unresolved farm problem that is giving Mr. Nixon such a hard time in his campaign?" "Ezra Benson has, to my mind," replied Eisenhower, who had also deliberately limited his own involvement, "been very honest and forthright and courageous in trying to get enacted into legislation plans and programs that I think are correct. And, therefore, for me to regret that he has been working would be almost a betrayal of my own views in this matter. I think we must find ways to give greater freedom to the farmer and make his whole business more responsive to market, rather than just to political considerations."<sup>152</sup>

While Benson appreciated the gesture—terming it a fitting "epitaph" to his career in public service<sup>153</sup>—Eisenhower's support only partially offset the painful, embarrassing indignity of his own party's rejection. As he had done four years earlier with *Farmers at the Crossroads*, Benson issued his own election-year apologia, *Freedom to Farm* in July 1960. "It doesn't matter whether we give [the "low income farmer"] 100 or 200 per cent of parity through the price-support programs," he concluded with his trademark bluntness, "his income problem will not be solved. His problem is one of volume, not price. He does not have an economic farm unit. He is not able to grow the volume of crops to benefit substantially by price supports. What he needs is an opportunity for

full employment. Undersized, undercapitalized, and underequipped farms cannot furnish such employment, nor can those who operate them possibly earn an adequate income without part-time work in other occupations.”<sup>154</sup>

Reader response ran the gamut.<sup>155</sup> “There are few grays in Benson’s spectrum,” the *Washington Post* observed, “and that is why he has had such difficulties with Congress.” “Benson believes so strongly that price supports and government production controls are morally wrong,” the *Des Moines Register* added, “that he sometimes closes his eyes to facts which do not fit his beliefs.” “[A] return to the good old days around Preston, Idaho [Benson’s home town], should resolve the farm problem,” the *Saturday Review* concluded sarcastically. On the other hand, the *Wall Street Journal* found Benson’s book to be well “timed to set the record straight.” The *Arizona Republic* called Benson the “voice of sanity,” and the New York *Herald Tribune* concluded: “Mr. Benson has the great advantage not always shared by high government officials, of knowing exactly what he is talking about.” However belated, the accolades must have been gratifying.

Finally, although the precise date is not identified but was evidently at some point shortly before he left government service, Benson experienced what was later described as a demonic attack. The specifics of the terrifying spiritual event speak not only to Benson’s frame of mind and the challenges he was then confronting, but also to the nature of his faith. As his youngest daughter, a teenager at the time, subsequently wrote:

Most of the family had gathered at Priest River, Idaho, for a few days vacation after Dad had toured some of our national forests. The rest of the family had gone—most of them to Canada to visit Barbara and Bob [Walker],<sup>156</sup> and Mom, Dad and I were to follow that day by plane. I, however, had a fall and hurt my leg quite badly so we decided to stay a day or two longer till I was in better shape. That night Daddy went into town to get some medication for me. As he was driving home he had some experiences with evil forces! He somehow lost power over the car and lost consciousness—and when he suddenly came to he was in the middle of a field just ready to hit some cattle. Another time he had gone off the road just before crossing a bridge over the river and got control just before the car was about to go over the edge into the river.

That night Mother slept in a bedroom downstairs with me because of my leg and Daddy slept upstairs. In the middle of the night Daddy came down the stairs. I could see him from my bed. He was crying and shaking. He came into our room and sat on the edge of my bed still crying and shaking and very pale. He told us he had just had an experience that he wanted

to tell us. Mother said are you sure Beth should hear this and Daddy said yes he wanted me to. He said that all of a sudden he felt like he was strongly restricted—that he was bound and couldn't move or caged in a box and unable to move his muscles to free himself. It was a very dark and evil feeling. He seemed to fight with all his might to free himself but could not. Then he prayed for deliverance from this evil spirit and suddenly he was free—the box and bounds were lifted and the darkness was replaced with light. Then a very beautiful feeling came over him—he felt calm and peaceful and felt the explanation come to him: the Lord loves him very much and loves our entire family. But the devil is trying and will continue to try to destroy us—to do all he can to thwart us and stop us from doing good. The Lord wants us to know this to be on guard and aware of the devil's desires so that we will recognize and protect ourselves. And if we remember the Lord he will help us and all will be fine and we will be able to overcome the evil one.

I will never forget this experience or the look and feeling I got from my dear father.<sup>157</sup>

## V

John F. Kennedy's narrow popular victory (118,550 votes) over Richard M. Nixon may have owed more to the Easterner's personal charisma than to an outright repudiation of Benson's controversial farm policies. "The ill-fated television debates," Benson's biographers suggest, "Kennedy's mod style, the issue of religion which seemed to work in Kennedy's favor, and international affairs, plus indeterminable elements, all played their role."<sup>158</sup> Benson, writing retrospectively, saw a much simpler answer: Nixon "began fighting for principle too late . . . [and] allowed himself to be stampeded by a small, noisy minority of Democratic propagandists in the Midwest. He misread the political signs, shrewd and experienced as he was."<sup>159</sup> Only a month after the election, he confessed "some concern that the prospect ahead for agriculture is not as bright at the moment as I would like to have it."<sup>160</sup>

Early the next month, in his official letter of resignation (effective January 20, 1961), he tried to be more positive: "It has been a great honor and high privilege to serve our farm people. . . . We have halted and reversed the trend towards a regimented agriculture. We have introduced the principle of flexibility . . . and restored to our people some of their lost freedom to plant, to market, to compete, and to make their own decisions." "Although agriculture still faces many problems," Eisenhower replied, "through your determined and dedicated work, and the efforts of your fine staff, the way has been pointed toward [the] solution of our prob-

lems.”<sup>161</sup> Of Eisenhower’s original 1953 cabinet appointees, Benson was one of only two who had served for the entire eight years.<sup>162</sup>

Addressing fellow Washington-based Latter-day Saints in late 1960, Benson reported: “It was a difficult thing to try and reverse a trend of many years, moving in [the] direction of more and more centralization of authority in the federal government [and] more and more control of price fixing in the field of agriculture.” Yet despite the many challenges, he was pleased that he had managed to stay true to his principles and, furthermore, asserted: “If I had it to do over again, I would follow very much the same course.”<sup>163</sup> As far as he was concerned, this comforting certitude had only one source: “I have had a conviction,” he told LDS faithful the following April 1961, “through all this period, my brethren and sisters, that I was where the Lord wanted me to be. . . . I have been convinced,” he continued, “I was doing the thing that seemed to me, at least, to be right . . . I have no bitterness today. . . . I have prayed—we have prayed as a family—that we could avoid any spirit of hatred or bitterness.”<sup>164</sup> “Perhaps,” he added, more contritely, in his memoirs, “I had seemed on occasion to be too uncompromising. Perhaps we did not establish, as fully as we might have, rapport with some in the Congress. As for our critics, . . . I love all God’s children—but I love some more than others.”<sup>165</sup>

Benson easily sold his family’s Washington home (to the Yugoslavian government, reportedly for \$60,000) and returned—with Flora and their children leaving first—to Salt Lake City early in 1961.<sup>166</sup> The past eight years had taken a considerable physical toll on him, and he struggled for a time thereafter to regain his health and stamina.<sup>167</sup> Now age sixty-one, he found the readjustment to his full-time ecclesiastical calling as an apostle to be more difficult than he had anticipated. He had to share a secretary at LDS headquarters, missed the fast-paced press of managing a mammoth bureaucracy, and began to feel “underused in the fulfillment of Church duties.”<sup>168</sup>

Completing his politically charged memoir, *Cross Fire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (published in October 1962), Benson found his personal politics drifting increasingly to the right—or those of the country to the left. He would subsequently contemplate several runs at national partisan office, champion and in turn be embraced by the John Birch Society and similar organizations, and from pulpits both in Utah and across the country (as well as abroad) promulgate a particular brand of conservative politics that would eventually generate more divisive controversy within

the LDS Church than his agriculture policies ever did.<sup>169</sup> The 1960s would witness Benson's emergence as Heaven's patriot and zealous anti-Communist crusader.

While Benson served as Secretary of Agriculture, his detractors complained that arrogance and dogmatism combined to form a bureaucrat who was especially frustrating to work with. "When Mr. Benson's term came to a close," his successor asserted in 1969, "the Department of Agriculture not only was disorganized—it was demoralized."<sup>170</sup> More recently, a curator at the National Museum of American History castigated Benson's "drumming of free enterprise," "free association of clichés," and "disregard for small farmers," among other failings. "He personified the soulless future of American agriculture," this critic opined. "Secretary Benson [and others] . . . envisioned a rural bourgeoisie that lived in neat houses, farmed with the latest machines, and consumed clothes, furniture, and appliances the same as urban folks."<sup>171</sup>

However, to his supporters, Benson stood above such carping—the personification of courage and rectitude.<sup>172</sup> Possessing "fortress-like faith" and "superb expertise in his field," according to his biographers, Benson

broke through the inertia of established tradition and entrenched attitudes to show the way toward agricultural reform. His very habits of not compromising and never giving up, made him valuable in the political arena where selling out is too often elevated into a fine art. . . . Being the recipient of political assaults brings joy to no one but Benson took comfort in the knowledge that in the end he would be vindicated. . . . [T]he annals of history may reward Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture far more than his contemporaries. This would be a fitting tribute to Ezra Taft Benson, the man who put the people's welfare above party politics.<sup>173</sup>

In another evaluation, these same biographers adopted a more nuanced appraisal of Benson's administrative success:

The last four years of Eisenhower's term constituted a period of mixed concepts and muddled improvisations. Expectations for the Soil Bank did not fully materialize and by 1960 the [government] again possessed large amounts of food and fiber. Costs exceeded those of any other program (even those of the Truman years). . . . [A]gricultural policy soon degenerated into an incongruous combination of open production and continued price supports. . . . Although Benson was perceptive and courageous, he seemed overly motivated by doctrinaire principles at a time when hard-pressed farmers needed sympathetic help and encouragement. This sincere man, who truly loved the land and those who tilled it, never fully

realized that his political rhetoric sounded too much like didactic sermons from Salt Lake City's Temple Square.<sup>174</sup>

Typically, during his eight years in office, Benson "fared best when his politics were tempered by the moderation of [a] politically-oriented president who took into consideration the criteria of feasibility and public acceptance."<sup>175</sup> While he "was able to achieve a modest reduction in the level of price support," Congress actually "won the war; it would never permit the secretary to lower the level of price support sufficiently to correct the surplus problem." During Benson's tenure, the "value of government-owned stocks of storable commodities rose from \$1.3 billion in 1952 to \$7.7 billion in 1959 and stood at \$6.4 billion in 1965. The annual cost of storage programs, production control programs, and surplus disposal programs rose from less than \$1 billion in 1952 to \$4.5 billion in 1965."<sup>176</sup> Benson learned to celebrate the modest victories, minimize the defeats, and find what satisfaction he could at having pointed out at virtually every turn what he believed to be a better way for the country he loved.<sup>177</sup>

One of Benson's close associates later summarized that, because of the Secretary's blending of religion and politics, "a dichotomy was set up," one that the "political people with whom he worked sensed":

I think they sensed that he was placing the moralistic realm and the economic realm above the realm in which they worked, the political realm. And I think they resented this downgrading of their calling. I think this resulted in some antagonism. Now, I can't document this, but I have this feeling, you see. They sometimes felt that they were being preached at, on moralistic terms, from a background that was not theirs, that this discipline was being offered to them in an area where they couldn't very well use it.

Now, through all this difficulty, the Secretary held up. He never wavered. Time and again we would meet, his staff, in some crisis, and some of us would be getting anxious and concerned and apprehensive. Not the Secretary. He had the inner calm that came from his religious faith. No question about this. We all recognized it. Without that resource, he never could have survived the eight years. Maybe without that resource he wouldn't have been plunged into the tormenting problems that came to him. I don't know.<sup>178</sup>

In many ways, Benson's great strengths were also his great weaknesses. He had barged—recklessly, some conclude; courageously, others counter—head-first into the rarified world of Washington, D.C., politics

supremely confident of the rightness of both his critique of American farm policy and his vision of the benefits of laissez-faire capitalism. His deeply held convictions had allowed him to weather considerable criticism, including attacks on his intelligence, character, family, and faith. His religious beliefs had provided him with the answers to satisfy any doubts. He brooked no questions about whether he knew what was in the long-term best interests of his country and its people and how best to achieve those interests. He dismissed any deviations from his program as expedient compromises to placate special interest groups or, worse, as thinly veiled attempts to undermine America's greatness. He was, he believed, God's eternally vigilant watchman on the ramparts of American freedom.

### Notes

1. Ezra Taft Benson, *Cross Fire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1962), 562.

2. *Ibid.*, 587, 585–86. In late 1960, as he was preparing to leave office, Benson called Reed “my counselor and advisor and helper through thick and thin.” Quoted in 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), 269.

3. “As the embodiment of family, home, and the American way,” Benson’s authorized biographer writes, “the Bensons were the focus of perhaps the most positive attention the Church had ever received throughout the country.” Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 292. For two informative studies of the American family during the 1950s, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988; rpt., New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

4. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 587. “The divine work of women involves companionship, homemaking, and motherhood,” Benson later commented. “Women, when you are married, it is the husband’s role to provide, not yours.” (No editor identified), *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 548–49.

5. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 587. “I’ve had to play a father’s role too,” Flora told a reporter. “‘What I Admire Most in My Husband,’ by Mrs. Ezra Taft Benson [Flora Amussen Benson], as told to Leonard J. Snyder,” *Copper’s Farmer*, June 1955, 54.

6. Derin Head Rodriguez, "Flora Amussen Benson: Handmaiden of the Lord, Helpmeet of a Prophet, Mother in Zion," *Ensign*, March 1982, 20. Benson's love for Flora was especially cemented when on April 25, 1950, he was sealed in marriage to his recently deceased cousin, Eva Amanda Benson (July 6, 1882–August 10, 1946). Eva was the never-married daughter of Benson's uncle Frank Andrus Benson. Flora had first suggested acting as proxy for Eva, then did so during the vicarious ordinance performed by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith in the Salt Lake Temple. "I have never witnessed a more unselfish act on the part of any person," Benson recorded, "and I love Flora all the more because of it. The Lord will richly bless her for this act of unselfish love for Eva and me and the Kingdom. Flora is one of the choicest daughters of our Heavenly Father." Ezra Taft Benson, Diary, April 25, 1950, copy courtesy of the Smith-Pettit Foundation.

7. "New LDS Chaplains[:] Reed A. Benson, Earl S. Beecher Set Apart for Duty in Service," *Church News*, May 14, 1952, 12. For Reed's setting apart as chaplain, see Benson, Diary, May 9, 1952.

8. "Mark A. Benson Receives Scholarship to Stanford," *Church News*, September 27, 1952, 5.

9. Flora had hoped to raise twelve children, but complications following Beth's birth in mid-1944 resulted in a hysterectomy in late 1946. Benson, Diary, October 24, 1946, and April 26, 1950. "I wanted twelve children, but had to settle for a choice half dozen," Flora later explained. "If we just would have had twins every time, we would have made it." Rodriguez, "Flora Amussen Benson," 20.

10. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 49.

11. *Ibid.*, 82–83.

12. *Ibid.*, 86.

13. *Ibid.*, 137.

14. *Ibid.*, 138–39.

15. *Ibid.*, 215–16.

16. *Ibid.*, 140. The Bensons surrendered to limousine service when it became apparent that the drivers were more familiar with Washington's maze of streets.

17. "All the family responsibilities will fall on you again," Benson warned Flora in early 1954. *Ibid.*, 174.

18. Responding to criticisms of possibly misusing public monies, Benson insisted that Eisenhower "encouraged me to take members of the family for the good-will value." *Ibid.*, 371. "Although space on the government plane was provided," he later explained, "meals, hotels, and other expenses were

borne by the family." Ezra Taft Benson, *God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 177.

19. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 141.

20. *Ibid.*, 199–200. Early the next year, the Bensons invited Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower to join them at the Virginia ranch of J. Willard Marriott, a successful hotelier and Washington DC Stake president. The Bensons treated their guests to another Mormon-oriented evening of singing, poem recitations, and humorous skits. See "LDS Home Night Demonstrated to President and Mrs. Eisenhower," *Church News*, February 12, 1955, 6.

21. Rodriguez, "Flora Amussen Benson," 19.

22. According to Benson, *God, Family, Country*, 176, Flora was especially concerned about the national exposure of her daughters.

23. Gerry Avant, "Home and Church Come First for Devoted Wife and Mother," *Church News*, April 20, 1974, 5.

24. The run-through was necessary to determine the length of the family's presentation. Benson did not consider the practice a rehearsal per se. "It was to be an informal Mormon home evening," he insisted. "Questions were to be answered, as the children decided, with 'a Church answer.'" Benson, *God, Family, Country*, 176–77.

25. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 214–15. Not quite a year and a half later, Benson was furious when Murrow presented what Benson thought was a distorted portrait of the problems facing America's small family farmers. *Ibid.*, 300. See also Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 240–41.

26. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 275. See also "Flora Benson Cited by Fashions League," *Church News*, November 12, 1955, 3–4.

27. "What I Admire Most in My Husband," 47, 54.

28. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 325.

29. *Ibid.*, 326. Reed graduated from Brigham Young University with a B.S. in 1953, an M.S. in 1975, and an Ed.D. in 1981.

30. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 326–27. "I'm a born politician, and I love it," Flora was quoted as saying the previous year. "Ezra has always encouraged me to speak. . . . For years he has urged me to get up at church affairs and say what's on my mind." Quoted in Dorothy McCardle, "Mrs. Truman Puts the Kettle On," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 21, 1955, F6.

31. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 327.

32. *Ibid.*, 336.

33. "Talk by Flora Amussen Benson, May 1962," in Volume 30 (1958) of Ezra Taft Benson, Scrapbooks, microfilm, Historical Department Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter LDS

Church Library). See also "Wives of Our Leaders[:] Husband, Family and Church Are Mrs. Benson's Whole Life," *Church News*, December 20, 1952, 6; "Tribute to Mrs. Ezra Taft Benson[;] Christian Science Monitor Praises Wife of Secretary," *Church News*, February 21, 1953, 13; and "Wives of General Authorities[:] Flora Amussen Benson," *Church News*, April 4, 1964, 8.

34. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 143.

35. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 181.

36. *Ibid.*, 185–86. Benson and others believed that local rural development committees would help small, inefficient farmers to transition out of farming and into other kinds of employment, but the federal program never received sufficient funding to progress beyond pilot stages.

37. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 355.

38. *Ibid.*, 353.

39. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 190.

40. *Ibid.*, 191.

41. George McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York: Random House, 1977), 76.

42. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 359.

43. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 193.

44. *Ibid.*, 194–95.

45. *Ibid.*, 194, 195; also 195–96.

46. "A Cabinet Member Says: 'Don't Let Unpopularity Scare You!'" *This Week Magazine*, August 17, 1958, 14.

47. *Ibid.*, 191–92. "Just as I began my remarks," Benson remembered, "two or three objects came out of the crowd and sailed high over the platform to my right. I wondered what they were." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 361.

48. David O. McKay, Diary, June 6, 1960, photocopy, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. McKay was speaking with Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona).

49. The paraphrase and quotation from note 48 to this point are from Benson, *Cross Fire*, 359–61. McKay's version reads:

President Eisenhower stated that after the first four years Secretary Benson told the President that he could have his resignation at any time, and the President responded that he would be pleased to h[ave] him remain, but that he was free to follow his own wishes. He paid tribute to Ezra Taft Benson saying, "There is no more honest man than Ezra." President Eisenhower said that there is one man who can take Ezra Taft

Benson's place, if he (The President) can get him, and then said the matter of leaving the cabinet is "for Ezra to decide." After the interview, President McKay talked with Brother Benson and informed him, repeating that the responsibility for making the decision is entirely his. President McKay also informed Brother Benson, "We want you to be loyal to your position here, loyal to the government and to the President, but if he can spare you, we would like to use you, and if not, we will do something else." (McKay, Diary, September 3, 1957)

Less than two weeks later, Benson called McKay and "reported that President Eisenhower would like him to stay in the Cabinet for at least a year. I advised him to stay and assured him that the First Presidency would arrange its affairs accordingly. I also told Brother Benson that if President Eisenhower wants him to stay longer that he should give him the assurance that he will stay." Ibid., September 12, 1957.

50. The American ambassador to Italy had suggested that Benson meet with the Pope. Benson raised the possibility with McKay, who asked that he avoid such an encounter. McKay worried about the image of a Mormon apostle paying his respects to the leader of the Catholic church. "Really they [Catholics] have everything to gain and nothing to lose," he told Benson, "and we have everything to lose and nothing to gain." "I am in fully harmony with that feeling," Benson replied. McKay, Diary, October 1-2, 1957.

51. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 197. Benson thought that his visit to Israel and the opportunity to discuss Old Testament prophecies and the LDS Church's interest in the Middle East with David Ben-Gurion was the "high point" of the tour. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 368-70.

52. McKay, Diary, October 17, 1957. See also "LDS Servicemen Assemble for Three-Day Conference," *Church News*, October 26, 1957, 2; "Elder Benson Speaks to 400 Japanese on Stop-Over Visit," *Church News*, November 23, 1957, 2; McKay, Diary, November 19, 1957; and especially Benson, "We Saw the Church around the World," *Instructor*, March 1958, 68-70.

53. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 365. Later, he commented on the two major impressions his many trade missions had made upon him: "First, the Paradise that is the United States of America, a land of abundance, of laughter, of confident people, but above all a land of freedom; second, the fact that, despite surface differences, people everywhere are very much alike. They want to be free, they want peace, and they want a decent living." Ibid., 561.

54. Ibid., 375; emphasis Benson's.

55. Ibid., 372-75; emphasis Benson's.

56. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 198.

57. McKay, Diary, February 23, 1958. Benson's daughter Beth remembered that during these years "Dad put on a lot of weight, which was part of his stress relief." Dew, *Benson*, 293.

58. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 199. "Naturally I am not unaware of your strong feelings in this matter," Eisenhower told one of Benson's opponents, "yet it seems to me that upon reflection you will concede to Mr. Benson not merely the right but more importantly the obligation vigorously to set forth the programs and concepts which, in his best judgment, are essential to the well being of our farm people. It is my opinion that if he failed to do so, he would be derelict in his responsibility, and though so doing may understandingly create some difficulties, I hardly see how he could effectively carry out his responsibilities in any other manner." *Ibid.*, 200–201; see also Benson, *Cross Fire*, 388–90.

59. Eisenhower quoted in Arthur Edson, "Stubborn Benson—Comes Back for More," *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, March 9, 1958, 3A.

60. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 203.

61. *Ibid.*, 204–5.

62. *Ibid.*, 205–6.

63. *Ibid.*, 206; and Benson, *Cross Fire*, 391.

64. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 391.

65. "You know I'm in your corner on this whole matter," Eisenhower reassured Benson. *Ibid.*, 393.

66. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 207.

67. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 396. Shortly before this dressing-down, on March 6, 1958, Eisenhower asked Benson to join a handful of men, mostly private citizens, subsequently dubbed the Eisenhower Ten, to provide for the continuation of a federal government during a national emergency. Benson's top-secret appointment was as Administrator-Designate of Emergency Food Agency. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eisenhower\\_Ten](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eisenhower_Ten) (accessed July 24, 2008).

68. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 208.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*, 208–10.

71. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 405–6.

72. *Ibid.*, 406.

73. *Ibid.*, 409.

74. *Ibid.*, 410.

75. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 213.

76. *Ibid.*, 215.

77. *Ibid.*, 214.

78. Benson “traveled more miles (20,000), to more states (20), and made more speeches than any other member of the Cabinet in the 1958 mid-term election.” Richard F. Fenno Jr., *The President’s Cabinet: An Analysis in the Period from Wilson to Eisenhower* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 186.

79. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 413.

80. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 216.

81. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 414.

82. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 217.

83. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 422.

84. *Ibid.*, 528.

85. *Ibid.*, 429.

86. Benson was especially vocal at this time in opposing federal aid to education, deficit spending, and the spread of Communism. *Ibid.*, 422–27.

87. “Just keep on as you are,” McKay counseled, “and we’ll wait for the Lord to tell us what the future holds.” *Ibid.*, 408. According to his diary, McKay told Benson: “Do not seek the candidacy; let them come to you and if they do, we shall consider it.” *Ibid.*, October 12, 1958.

88. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 218.

89. *Ibid.*, 219.

90. *Ibid.*, 222.

91. *Ibid.*, 223.

92. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 460.

93. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 223–25.

94. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 521–26.

95. *Ibid.*, 462–63.

96. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 232.

97. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 487.

98. *Ibid.*, 470. Seven years later, his anti-Communist activism by now in

full swing, Benson provided an additional account of his meeting with Khrushchev that included details absent from his published memoirs and details not found in any contemporary newspaper account of the event:

As we talked face-to-face, he [Khrushchev] indicated that my grandchildren would live under communism. After assuring him that I expected to do all in my power to assure that his and all other grandchildren will live under freedom, he arrogantly declared in substance: "You Americans are so gullible. No, you won't accept communism outright, but we'll keep feeding you small doses of socialism until you'll finally wake up and find you already have communism. We'll so weaken your economy until you'll fall like overripe fruit into our hands." Benson, "Our Immediate Responsibility," Address delivered at Brigham Young University, October 25, 1966, in Jerreld L. Newquist, comp., *An Enemy Hath Done This* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Publishers, 1969), 320.

Benson repeated this sensationalized version of the incident—"as Mr. Khrushchev said to me face-to-face . . ."—nearly thirteen years later. Benson, "The Task before Us," July 4, 1979, privately circulated. Dew, *Benson*, 339, 364, includes the episode of Benson's comments to Khrushchev in her biography. Francis M. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson: Statesman, Patriot, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1996), 224–25, does not.

In earlier speeches, Benson took note of the same ideas but attributed them as follows: "Khrushchev said this to an American television audience," "Khrushchev is reported to have said," and "Khrushchev tells us [i.e., Americans generally] to our face . . ." Ezra Taft Benson, *The Red Carpet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 58, 65, and 126. In fact, a month before Benson's meeting with Khrushchev, U.S. Vice-President Richard M. Nixon had reported publicly on his own recent encounter: "Mr. Khrushchev predicted that our grandchildren in the U.S. would live under Communism, and he reiterated this to me in our talks." The next year at the Republican National Convention, Nixon added: "When Mr. Khrushchev says that our grandchildren will live under communism, let us say his grandchildren will live in freedom." Quoted in "This Is My Answer," *Time*, August 10, 1960, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com) (accessed June 23, 2007); and "The American Presidency Project[;] Richard Nixon[;] Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Chicago July 28th, 1960," [www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu) (accessed June 23, 2007). Finally, the Library of Congress in 1962 could not document that Khrushchev ever actually made the statement regarding "small doses of socialism." See Morris K. Udall, "Khrushchev Could Have Said It," *New Republic*, May 7, 1962, 14–15. Benson evidently conflated the memory of his own meeting with Khrushchev with comments attributed—ac-

curately or not—by others to the Soviet leader. For the propensity for memoirists to make such embellishments, see Richard D. Poll, *History and Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 123–27; and Richard D. Poll, “Truth, Facts, and Personal Anecdotes,” *Sunstone*, September 1991, 54–55.

99. Benson, “Some Personal Recollections of the Struggle for Freedom in the 20th Century—Part 1,” 5, June 2, 1978, photocopy in possession of the Smith-Pettit Foundation.

100. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 470–71. See also Elinor Lee, “K.’s Son-in-Law Asks Benson Son to Proselyte,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 1959, C20; and “6 Copies [of the Book of Mormon] Given to Khrushchev Family,” *Church News*, September 19, 1959, 6; the books were sent to Khrushchev’s son-in-law for distribution. For the later presence of the LDS Church in Russia, see “Fruits of Prayer Taking Hold in Russia,” *Church News*, September 6, 2003, 9–10.

101. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 472.

102. *Ibid.*, 483.

103. *Ibid.*, 392.

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Ibid.*, 484.

106. *Ibid.*, 487.

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*, 488. See also Ovid A. Martin, “Benson ‘Wins’ Soviet Worshipers,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 4, 1959, 8A; and “A Church Service in Soviet Russia,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 26, 1959, 76.

109. When another Republican lost to a Democrat in a special election that November 1959—this time in North Dakota—the “defeat once more stirred talk of getting rid of Ezra Taft Benson lest the party ruin its chances in the fall [1960] presidential election.” According to Benson’s biographers: “The verbal venom flowed freely from the corridors of Congress.” Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 241.

110. *Ibid.*

111. *Ibid.*, 235.

112. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 500.

113. *Ibid.*, 501.

114. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 237. Benson later said that Eisenhower’s endorsement of the Food for Peace program was “one of my proudest moments as Secretary of Agriculture.” Ezra Taft Benson, *Title of Liberty*, compiled by Mark A. Benson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 130.

115. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 236.

116. Ibid.

117. Ibid.

118. Ibid., 239.

119. Ibid. By this time, Benson's critics included at least one high-ranking LDS Church leader. J. Reuben Clark, first counselor to David O. McKay, opined privately in late 1959 that Benson "had done and was doing more to destroy the small farmer than anyone else had done." Clark, memorandum (presumably to file), December 4, 1959, in Clark Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

120. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 240.

121. Ibid., 242.

122. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 503.

123. Ibid., 504.

124. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 243.

125. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956–1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 591. Speaking with Benson in early July 1960, Eisenhower was reportedly less reserved: "Don't give an inch in the stand you have taken. Make it clear to the people that you and I stand shoulder to shoulder in what we feel is best for agriculture and the country." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 526; emphasis Benson's.

126. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 245.

127. Ibid.

128. Ibid., 246.

129. Ibid., 250.

130. Ibid., 250–51.

131. Ibid., 251.

132. Ibid., 266. They continue: "The Vice-President (resembling Eisenhower) was willing to temporize and to implement plans more slowly [than Benson] as political events dictated."

133. Ibid.; also 252–53.

134. Ibid., 253–54.

135. Ibid., 254–55.

136. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 529.

137. Kennedy quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 255–56.

138. *Ibid.*, 256–57. Following his first meeting with Kennedy in late 1957, David O. McKay, *Diary*, November 12, 1957, recorded: “I enjoyed my visit with him, although [I was] not too much impressed with him as a leader.” A little more than two years later, however, McKay had warmed up to the Massachusetts senator: “We had a very pleasant interview with Senator Kennedy, talking on various domestic and international subjects. I was very much impressed with him, and think that the country will be in good hands if he is elected as he seems to be a man of high character” *Ibid.*, January 30, 1960.

139. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 257.

140. *Ibid.*, 258.

141. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 544.

142. *Ibid.*, 543. McKay also instructed Benson about this same time that the Church did not want him “to enter the political campaigns this Fall.” McKay, *Diary*, September 21, 1960.

143. See Benson, *Cross Fire*, 544–46.

144. *Ibid.*, 511, 517.

145. *Ibid.*, 518.

146. *Ibid.*, 519.

147. *Ibid.*

148. Clare Middlemiss, memorandum to Ezra Taft Benson, June 25, 1962, in McKay, *Diary*, June 26, 1962.

149. McKay, *Diary*, March 5, 1960; emphasis McKay’s.

150. When Benson met with McKay in early April to discuss “again the matter of his running for the presidency of the United States,” McKay answered: “I told him that there is no change in my advice as given to him on March 5, 1960 when he called; viz., that the pressure for this candidacy must come from outside groups, and not from him nor from his son Reed.” McKay, *Diary*, April 6, 1960; emphasis his. As late as mid-July 1960, Benson still clung to the hope that Rockefeller would run, or at least allow his name to be floated as a possible candidate. “It was not that I did not think the Vice President would make a good President over-all,” he later wrote, “despite my doubts concerning his position on agriculture, labor, and aid to education, among other things. I felt sure he would be immeasurably preferable to the immature and inexperienced Senator from Massachusetts [Kennedy], running on the strongly socialistic platform of the Democratic Party. But I doubted that Nixon could win and I felt quite sure that Rockefeller would be successful should he be nominated.” Benson, *Cross Fire*, 531.

151. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 532.

152. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 266–67.

153. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 539.

154. Ezra Taft Benson, *Freedom to Farm* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 199–200.

155. Media responses quoted in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 262–64.

156. Oldest daughter Barbara had married Robert Walker on September 29, 1955.

157. Flora Beth Benson Burton, Letter to “Dear Daddy,” June 1973, 122–23, in Ezra Taft Benson, Oral History, Interviewed by James B. Allen. October 1974–May 1975, LDS Church Library. Flora Beth Benson was born on August 12, 1944, and married David A. Burton on June 8, 1966.

158. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 267.

159. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 551, 552.

160. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 268. In his memoirs, Benson described Kennedy’s farm policies as “not only fantastic, they were a nightmare—the worst farm program, bar none, that I have ever heard advocated by any responsible figure in this country.” Benson, *Cross Fire*, 552. With the appointment of Orville L. Freeman as Secretary of Agriculture, Benson “knew for sure that some of his policies were going to be altered.” Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 268.

161. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 268–69.

162. The other was Arthur E. Summerfield, the U.S. Postmaster General.

163. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 270.

164. Ezra Taft Benson, “A World Message,” *Improvement Era*, June 1961, 430–31. “I believe . . . [t]he people need to know more about what their leaders are like,” Benson explained his reasons for publicly treating in detail some of the more personally painful aspects of his administration, “what motivates them, how decisions are made, the kind of infighting that takes place as political forces and figures struggle to pass or defeat legislative programs and in so doing mold the future of this republic.” Benson, *Cross Fire*, xvii–xviii.

165. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 508.

166. See Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 271; and Benson, *Cross Fire*, 587–89.

167. "Ezra's physical resistance fell to an all-time low," his authorized biographer notes. "He was exhausted and had little appetite. One morning in the [Salt Lake] temple he felt so weak that he rested for two hours before returning to his office. Later that day his physician admitted him to the hospital. He couldn't remember feeling so completely tired. . . . The doctor diagnosed physical exhaustion and prescribed two weeks of rest." Dew, *Benson*, 361–62.

168. *Ibid.*, 236–37. When Benson informed David O. McKay in mid-1961 that he had "received an invitation from the senators and congressmen to go back to Washington as an adviser," McKay replied: "I feel that if this matter comes up again that Brother Benson should remain here; that we need him at home." McKay, *Diary*, June 29, 1961.

169. Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "Religion and Reform: A Case Study of Henry A. Wallace and Ezra Taft Benson," *Journal of Church and State* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 534–35.

170. In Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Ezra Taft Benson: Farm Policy in the 1950s," *Agricultural History* 44 (October 1970): 377 note 38.

171. Pete Daniel, "The USDA Legacy: From the New Deal to Silent Spring," 2003, [www.historicaltextarchive.com](http://www.historicaltextarchive.com) (accessed June 27, 2007).

172. A few years later, during Kennedy's administration, Benson met with several of his former employees. "This was when the executive branch . . . [was] pursuing a policy diametrically opposed to that which the Secretary had pursued," one of Benson's co-workers recalled. "What did he say? Bitterness about the turn of events? Antagonism for his successors? No. Apology for what he'd done? No. Just the same old reiteration of what he stood for, his feeling that this was sound and best and should be done and would ultimately triumph, and reiteration of what a great privilege it was to serve one's country, and all the old—what shall we say, dogma? platitudes? about the historical principles of government. . . . This is from the heart. This is the man." Don Paarlberg, *Oral History*, Interviewed by Ed Edwin, January 17, 1968, 109–10, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

173. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture*, 274, 275, 276.

174. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Eisenhower and Ezra Taft Benson," 378.

175. Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, "Religion and Reform," 534.

176. Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 146, 140. After Benson, U.S. farm policy looked initially to control overproduc-

tion more effectively. In 1973, direct payments for withholding land from cultivation were phased out. Three years later, a limited, strictly voluntary program took some crops—mostly grains—out of the market for as many as three years, or until prevailing market prices attained certain predetermined levels. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act, replacing existing price supports with transitional subsidies intended eventually to allow the free market—not federal policy—to determine production. By the end of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, in response to low prices and natural disasters, emergency subsidies had begun to increase, and farm debt to decrease. “Agriculture,” <http://encarta.msn.com> (accessed July 27, 2007).

177. “Four-fifths of our agriculture today is free of controls,” Benson pointed out a year before leaving office, “and is in fairly good balance and doing fairly well. It is the one-fifth where we have attempts by government to fix prices, to control production, that we are in difficulty. And it is in that area where we have the buildup of surpluses, because we brought our production into government warehouses instead of permitting that production to move into consumption as it should do.” *Meet the Press* 4, no. 3 (January 17, 1960): 4.

178. Paarlberg, *Oral History*, 116–17.