

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Road Trip: The Strange Travels of Mark Sanford and Brigham Young

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Absence makes the heart grow fonder –Thomas H. Bayly (ca. 1818)

In the backwash from the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, scandals at virtually all levels of government have plagued the American political landscape. Governors have been especially prominent in the media-intensive cavalcade of investigations, confessions, promises of redemption, and resignations. Illinois faces the prospect of having consecutive governors occupying the state penitentiary simultaneously. In New York, peccadillos atop the executive branch have come with such stunning rapidity that as many as six people may end up serving as the Empire State's governor and lieutenant governor in less than two years.

Among the strangest of these political spectacles is the ongoing soap opera triggered by the bizarre behavior of Mark Sanford, governor of South Carolina. Sanford's indignant wife, Jenny, has exited the gubernatorial mansion, divorced him (final in March 2010), published a tell-all memoir, and embarked on a national book tour that has become a triumphant antithesis of the traditional credo of the embarrassed American political wife: "Stand by your man." Meanwhile, an embattled Governor Sanford has held tearful press conferences unaccompanied as he fends off cries for impeachment, censure, and resignation from South Carolina's legislature as well as a continuing investigation into his admittedly improper use of state funds for personal purposes. How did the ongoing Sanford scandal come about, and is it unique?

South Carolinians, if not most Americans, were mystified in June of 2009 to find that Governor Sanford had gone missing, vanished without explanation. He left behind not only his puzzled family but his theoretically omnipresent security detail.

For the better part of a week, Governor Sanford's embarrassed

staff tried gamely but unsuccessfully to deal with press inquiries. Initially the story was that no one knew where he was. Pressed aggressively by reporters, the story morphed into a staff explanation that Sanford must have gone hiking along the mountainous Appalachian Trail to recharge his batteries after a stressful legislative session. No one knew on which segment of the Georgia-to-Maine track he had sought renewal or how he could be contacted.

Bauer, South Carolina's lieutenant governor, also left out of the loop, was not amused. He commented publicly: "I cannot take lightly that his staff has not had communication with him for more than four days, and that no one including his family, knows his whereabouts."¹ A state senator cogently asked who would have been able to authorize use of the South Carolina National Guard in Sanford's absence.

On June 24, the next bizarre chapter emerged. Governor Sanford had reappeared at the Atlanta airport in Georgia after returning unannounced from Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, far from either the Appalachian Trail or South Carolina. He had, Sanford explained, been tangoing with a woman other than the Palmetto State's First Lady.

Speculation about the impact of this extraordinary chain of events on Sanford's political career began immediately, fueled by the maverick governor's months-long refusal to apply for South Carolina's share of billions of dollars in federal stimulus aid at a time when the state's economy was reeling from the worst recession in seventy-five years. At stake also has been the viability of Sanford as a possible Republican presidential nominee in 2012, if not his current hold on South Carolina's gubernatorial chair.

Citizens of other states tempted to indulge in smug reactions of "it couldn't happen here" might wish to recall that it already has in at least one other place—Utah. In that case, Governor Brigham Young was involved; his unexplained five-week absence from his duties in the spring of 1857 took place on a scale, in a direction, and with a flourish that makes the Governor Sanford episode seem bland. As with Sanford's disappearance, Governor Young's absence had an international flavor as well as national political implications.

As early as January 1857, Brigham Young began to drop hints to relatives and Church colleagues that he was thinking of a trek

north to Oregon Territory to inspect the new Mormon Indian mission—Fort Limhi—on the Salmon River. By spring, he had made up his mind and, on April 24, left for Oregon, his first absence from Utah since 1848 and the last one before his death in 1877.

For relatives, Young devised a cover story that the trip was for the benefit of his health. This explanation lacked credibility, given the fact that he had been virtually prostrate since the death of his second counselor, Jedediah Morgan Grant, in December 1856, and the daunting, still-snow-packed wilderness awaiting him in the mountains of southern Oregon.

To his new boss in Washington, D.C., U.S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass, Young offered no explanation. He simply left his post, without either informing Cass or applying for the customary leave of absence, a lapse that later prompted Congress to pass legislation requiring territorial governors to seek such authorization. Unlike South Carolina today, in 1857 there was no lieutenant governor in Utah to assume the territory's executive duties. Next in the line of authority after the governor was Utah's territorial secretary, but that position had never been properly filled after the murder of incumbent Almon W. Babbitt in 1856. Nominally in charge of Utah's executive functioning during Governor Young's five-week absence was merchant William H. Hooper, a confidant whom Young had appointed interim territorial secretary on a de facto basis, without the authority or federal sanction to do so.

Why had Governor Brigham Young embarked on an arduous trek of a thousand miles—mostly outside of Utah—at a hazardous season of the year and at a time when he was in poor health?

Historian David L. Bigler of Roseville, California, the leading authority on Fort Limhi, has argued that Young was motivated, not by the need for a relaxing vacation but by a desire for strategic reasons to examine firsthand the terrain in southern Oregon Territory as well as in what later became southwestern Montana Territory. As Bigler sees it, Young viewed Fort Limhi as a way station for a possible mass Mormon migration out of Utah in the event of a renewal of troubles with the U.S. government. Possible destinations for such a move were either the isolated Bitterroot Valley of Montana or some unspecified haven on the Pacific Coast.²

As evidence that this tour was anything but routine, Bigler notes that Governor Young took an entourage of 142 follow-

ers—including the entire First Presidency, all but one of the Quorum of Twelve then in Utah, six Nauvoo Legion (militia) generals, and two Indian chiefs of the Northern Wasatch Utah and Pahvant Ute tribes. Did Young notify Oregon’s governor, George Curry, or his superintendent of Indian affairs of this impending visit? He did not, ignoring these worthies as he had Secretary Cass.

Whether the government of Argentina took note of Governor Sanford’s 2009 visit is not known, but we do know that the two European powers with possessions on North America’s Pacific Coast—Russia and the United Kingdom—were aware of Young’s trip soon after his return to Salt Lake City in May. This sensitivity arose as a consequence of speculation that welled up in California and the Pacific Northwest about a Mormon exodus from Utah.

So alarmed were the Russians about the possible, uncompensated loss of Russian America (Alaska) to a Mormon seizure, that in December 1857 Tsar Alexander II authorized the beginning of negotiations with the U.S. government to sell the colony.

Similarly, British concerns about the defensibility of Vancouver Island—a destination long of interest to the Mormons—was such that Queen Victoria removed the area from the ineffectual administration of the Hudson’s Bay Company and created the crown colony of British Columbia in June 1858.³

What followed Brigham Young’s return to Salt Lake City on May 26, 1857, was James Buchanan’s decision to replace him as governor and, two days later, General Winfield Scott’s creation of the U.S. Army’s Utah Expedition to escort Young’s successor west. The fat was in the fire. The Utah War was on.

Two years later, in June 1859, Brigham Young asked Utah’s territorial delegate in Congress, Dr. John M. Bernhisel, to write a memo setting forth his conversations over the past several years with President James Buchanan. Among the undated interactions that Bernhisel described was one that probably took place in early 1858. In this White House meeting, nearly a year after Brigham Young’s mysterious, unauthorized, five-week absence from Utah’s gubernatorial chair, President Buchanan was still pressing Bernhisel for an explanation about exactly where Young had gone and why.⁴ They were the same questions that began circulating in South Carolina during the summer of 2009.

Did any of Brigham Young’s lonely wives storm out of Salt Lake

City's Beehive House in 1857 as Jenny Sanford did in Columbia, South Carolina, during 2009? The answer is both "no" and "sort of." Young minimized the likelihood of connubial dissatisfaction in his household(s) through the firm exercise of patriarchal authority and the shrewd decision, unlike Governor Sanford's, to take three of his more than twenty wives with him to Oregon. Nonetheless—for reasons unrelated to the Fort Limhi trek—in 1873, one of Brigham Young's disaffected plural wives, Ann Eliza Webb Young, did indeed leave his bed and board and forced him to appear in a Salt Lake City divorce court to answer charges of neglect, cruelty, and desertion. In 1876, the former Mrs. Young wrote an autobiography about her marital experiences, as Mrs. Sanford has done, and embarked on a sensational, long-running, cross-country lecture tour to exploit the turmoil in her domestic arrangement with Utah's occasionally absent governor.⁵

Notes

1. Kate Linthicum, "South Carolina Governor Checks in after Taking a Hike," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2009; <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/24/nation/na-missing-gov24> (accessed March 28, 2010).

2. For the most complete description of Brigham Young's 1857 trek to Fort Limhi and analysis of its Utah War implications, see two works by David L. Bigler: *Fort Limhi: The Mormon Adventure in Oregon Territory, 1855–1858* (Spokane, Wash.: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 2003), 135–60; "Mormon Missionaries, the Utah War, and the 1858 Bannock Raid on Fort Limhi," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 53 (Autumn 2003): 30–53. See also William P. MacKinnon, *At Sword's Point, Part I: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858* (Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Co., an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 143–45, 443 note 48.

3. For these politico-geographic consequences and 1857–58 European fears of a mass Mormon exodus to the Pacific Coast, see MacKinnon, "Epilogue to the Utah War: Impact and Legacy," *Journal of Mormon History* 29 (Fall 2003): 247–48, and his *At Sword's Point, Part I*, 439–44.

4. John M. Bernhisel, "Account of Conversations with President James Buchanan," June 1859, LDS Church History Library.

5. Jenny Sanford, *Staying True* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010). Ann Eliza Webb Young titled her autobiography *Wife No. 19* (Hartford, Conn.: Dustin, Gilman, 1876), and revised it as *Life in Mormon Bondage* (Philadelphia: Aldine, 1908). The biography and fictional account about

Ann Eliza's life are Irving Wallace, *The Twenty-Seventh Wife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961) and David Ebershoff, *The Nineteenth Wife: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2008).

René Girard and Mormon Scripture: A Response

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This short piece responds to Mack C. Stirling's article, "Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of René Girard," 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 59–105. I offer a counter-interpretation of what I take to be (1) the thrust of Girard's own work on scripture and (2) the implications of that thrust for Girardian interpretation of specifically Mormon scripture.

Scripture through the Girardian Lens

Scripture, as scripture, is inconvenient. The Book of Mormon is exemplary in this regard. It appears in the hands of two young men or women on one's doorstep without warning, and yet it impatiently demands uncompromised attention from its reader. Indeed, not only does the Book of Mormon close by asking its readers to rethink the whole of world history carefully in light of the book (Moro. 10:3), but it also dares to assume that the pondering reader will naturally come to trust that the book is true even before asking God (Moro. 10:4).¹ The Book of Mormon's Old World predecessor—the Christian Bible—might be said to be slightly less inconvenient than the Book of Mormon (at least for believing Mormons). Offering recourse to the tangles of translation issues, to typological and allegorical readings justified by the relationship between the two testaments, and to a variety of rival but equally canonical traditions uncovered by historians and tex-