

“SAVING THE CONSTITUTION” WITH WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM: EZRA TAFT BENSON, W. CLEON SKOUSEN, AND THEIR ATTEMPT TO SOLICIT THE HELP OF FBI DIRECTOR J. EDGAR HOOVER

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When Mormon apostle Ezra Taft Benson moved to the nation’s capital in 1953 to begin his duties as the Secretary of Agriculture, he had a secret to keep. The president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, David O. McKay, who called communism the “anti-Christ,” had given him a special blessing before he departed. He blessed Benson that he “might see . . . the enemies who would thwart the freedoms of the individual as vouchsafed by the Constitution” and instructed him to “be fearless in the condemnation of these subversive influences.”¹

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1. McKay, quoted in “Civic Groups Hear Talk on Thanksgiving, Freedom,” *LDS Church News*, Nov. 29, 1952, 54; Benson blessing, quoted in Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (University of Utah Press, 2020), 32. See also David O. McKay, diary, Nov. 29, 1952, box 30, folder 6, David O. McKay Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

McKay uttered these powerful words during the turbulent Cold War, and Benson interpreted them as “a call from God.”²

Benson was not the first person the president asked to help preserve American freedom. Benson’s close friend, W. Cleon Skousen, received a similar call and during his sixteen-year employment at the FBI (1935–1951) he sought to capitalize in that position as he gained valuable insights into the “threatening clouds of communism.”³ In subsequent years, Skousen and Benson would combine their energies and efforts to warn Americans that democracy and capitalism were under siege—and could only flourish if they followed the teachings in holy scripture, which they insisted the nation had strayed from. Citing a ubiquitous Mormon prophecy, they proclaimed that “Mormon elders”—a majority white male patriarchy bearing the priesthood—would “save the Constitution” as it “hung by a thread.”⁴

When Benson and Skousen advanced this exceptionalist narrative—a narrative that would intertwine free market economics with Mormon theology; and one that deemed liberal president Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs a precursor to communism and socialism that presaged the End Times (some Christians called him

2. Ezra Taft Benson, oral history interview with James B. Allen, October 1974–May 1975, 55, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. See also Mark E. Petersen, “Ezra Taft Benson: A Habit of Integrity,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1974, 22–23.

3. W. Cleon Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 3rd ed. (1939; Desert News Press, 1948), x; see also 19–41. For McKay and Skousen, see “Conversations with President McKay,” undated, box 177, folder 16, Ernest L. Wilkinson Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections (hereafter Perry Special Collections), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

4. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 41–43. For the prophecy in Mormon discourse, see Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *The Papers of Josph Smith: Journals*, vol. 3, *May 1843–June 1844* (Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 12n27; Brigham Young, July 4, 1854, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:15; Orson Hyde, Jan. 3, 1858, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:152; and Donald Q. Cannon, ed., *Latter-day Prophets and the United States Constitution* (Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1991).

"the anti-Christ")—they realized they needed more.⁵ Given what was at stake, Benson and Skousen turned to the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, in their ambitious effort to save the Constitution. Enamored with Hoover's bold vision of a white Christian patriarchy at the vanguard of communist resistance, the Mormon duo sought to share this timely message with anyone who would listen, especially members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Benson's and Skousen's FBI files, now declassified, reveal their relentless efforts to enlist Hoover's help. They also reveal that, because of Benson and Skousen's affiliation with the John Birch Society, an anticommunist fringe group, the director shunned them.⁶



When J. Edgar Hoover became the nation's sixth FBI director in 1924, the world was mired in political and social upheaval. Only a few years earlier the Bolsheviks had established a communist state in the wake of a bloody civil war.⁷ Subsequent efforts to establish communism in other

5. Matthew Avery Sutton, "Was FDR the Anti-Christ? The Birth of Fundamentalism Antiliberalism in a Global Age," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (2012): 1052–74; Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 113. For Mormon exceptionalism, see Reed D. Slack, "The Mormon Belief of an Inspired Constitution," *Journal of Church and State* 36, no. 1 (1994): 35–56; and Philip L. Barlow, "Chosen Land, Chosen People: Religious and American Exceptionalism Among the Mormons," in *Mormonism and American Politics*, edited by Randall Balmer and Jana Riess (Columbia University Press, 2016); J. Reuben Clark, *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Deseret Book, 1962), 6–8.

6. For the John Birch Society, see Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Basic Books, 2022); Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); and D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

7. Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (Basic Books, 2017).

European and Asian countries floundered. By 1921, only two states—Russia and Mongolia—were ruled by communist parties. But by 1954, three decades into Hoover’s tenure as director, communist regimes had been established in most of Eastern Europe, all of the Soviet republics, as well as China, Mongolia, North Korea, and North Vietnam. There was even fear that communism would take hold in the United States, but this was met with stiff resistance from right-wing groups and the federal government.⁸

Hoover’s tenure as FBI director paralleled the rapidly growing struggle between Washington and Moscow in which competing visions of capitalism and communism dominated global politics, creating a bipolar international system that triggered a global Cold War.⁹ Hoover, like all Americans, was affected profoundly by the Cold War’s potent reach, which, in turn, shaped everything he did leading the agency. Indeed, over the course of his directorship until he died in 1972, Hoover argued vigorously that Americans could only defeat communism by living Christian teachings and by recognizing that the nation’s laws were biblically based. Raised in a devout Presbyterian household, he proclaimed the “United States a Christian nation” founded by “Christian men.”¹⁰ For Hoover, this meant that the country’s natural order

8. George W. Breslauer, *The Rise and Demise of World Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 12; Maurice Isserman, *Reds: The Tragedy of American Communism* (Basic Books, 2024), 34–38; Michael Willrich, *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle Between Immigrant Radicals and the US Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Basic Books, 2023), 339–51. See also Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

9. Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (Hill and Wang, 2007), chap. 1; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford University Press, 1997), chaps. 2–3.

10. Hoover, “Time for Decision,” Nov. 24, 1964, copy in box 171, folder 3, Wilkinson Papers. For Hoover’s faith, see Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023), chap. 1.

was biblical, meaning that it was white, Christian, patriarchal, hetero-normative, and authoritarian—the essence of what scholars would call white Christian nationalism.¹¹

In subscribing to this political and cultural framework, Hoover “viewed segregation as part of God’s law and order.”¹² This explains why he refused to crack down on violent protestors who rejected the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* or why he failed to dispatch federal agents to protect embattled Freedom Riders in the South. It also explains why he was reluctant to investigate the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacy groups unless the president ordered it. All of this clashed with his perceived natural order.¹³

To this end, Hoover ensured that the FBI remained both “lily white” and male dominated. Of the eight thousand agents on the FBI payroll, wrote Bill Sullivan, Hoover’s assistant director, only seventy of them were African Americans while 99.4 percent of the bureau was

11. For excellent studies on white Christian nationalism, see Martin, *Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*; Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2021); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and Michael O. Emerson and Glenn E. Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness: How Racism Distorts the Christian Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

12. Martin, *Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*, 110; Emerson and Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness*, 43.

13. James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (University Press of Kansas, 1991), 167; Patricia Sullivan, *Justice Rising: Robert Kennedy’s America in Black and White* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 102, 110; Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 164–65; Karen S. Anderson, “Massive Resistance, Violence, and Southern Social Relations: The Little Rock, Arkansas, School Integration Crisis, 1954–1960,” in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, edited by Clive Webb (Oxford University Press, 2005), 210. Linda Gordon writes that Hoover was “hardly known for his liberalism to act.” Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017), 192.

white and male.¹⁴ Sullivan further acknowledged that Hoover “hated liberalism, blacks and Jews,” adding that “he had a great long list of hates.”¹⁵ Hoover’s racism was most evident toward Martin Luther King, whom he personally loathed and whose influence he sought to curb. The director ordered wiretaps on King’s home and office in a devious attempt link him with communism. Historian Paul Harvey perceptively writes, “Hoover’s prurient style of Presbyterianism, his self-image as an upright defender of ‘Christian Renewal’ against ‘Soviet Rule’ turned him from a spiritual Cold Warrior to a domestic stalker.”¹⁶

But it was not just King that Hoover loathed. He held condescending views toward Black people in general, fueled by an unshakable conviction that they were uninformed and uneducated and could be easily duped by propagandists within the Communist Party. Hoover therefore saw civil rights organizations as targets for communist subversion and as a danger to national security. In short, he warned that communists used racial discontent to advance their agenda.¹⁷

14. Sullivan to J. Edgar Hoover, Oct. 6, 1971, in William C. Sullivan [with Bill Brown], *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover’s FBI* (W. W. Norton, 1979), appendix C, 265–77.

15. Sullivan, oral history interview with Ovid Demaris, 1972, in Ovid Demaris, *The Director: An Oral Biography of J. Edgar Hoover* (Harper’s Magazine Press, 1975), 226. Scholars have also chronicled Hoover’s racism. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Penguin, 1983), 153; Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover, The Man and the Secrets* (Penguin, 1991), 500; and Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (Viking, 2022), 657.

16. Paul Harvey, *Martin Luther King: A Religious Life* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 128. For Hoover linking King with communism, see Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 40–43; Sullivan, *Justice Rising*, 189–90; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (Simon and Schuster, 1998), 150–54; and Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023), 511–12.

17. See, for example, “Communist Infiltration of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Dec. 13, 1954, FOIA 61-11376-852, NAACP FBI File; unidentified memo to J. Edgar Hoover, “Communist Influence in Racial Matters,” Jan. 20, 1964, FOIA 100-438794-64, Southern Christian

These themes converged acutely in Hoover's 1958 book *Masters of Deceit*, the most popular anticommunist book ever published in the post-World War II era. Four years later Hoover capitalized on the publicity by publishing *A Study of Communism*, which he wrote for high school students as part of their "patriotic curriculum."¹⁸ In both books, Hoover declared that Americans of all ages needed the tools to recognize communist tactics and methods and he intended to provide them. He said that communists had infiltrated the nation's churches, schools, businesses, and governments and then identified several "communist front groups" that masqueraded as friendly institutions.¹⁹

Hoover's most provocative section in *Masters of Deceit* is when he contrasted Christianity with communism. He not only called communism a "false religion," but he avowed that Marxists could not coexist with Christians because they wanted the "utter elimination of all religion."²⁰ From that logic, Hoover claimed that communism posed a full-throttled attack on all traditional values, which included not only religion and capitalism, but also the nuclear family. In contrast, Hoover said that liberals were lukewarm in fighting communism.

Leadership Conference FBI File. See also "Hoover Says Reds Exploit Negroes," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1964. For civil rights and national security, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 87–89, 102–4.

18. Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (Free Press, 1995), 281. See also Gage, *G-Man*, 462–63; and Matthew Cecil, *Branding Hoover's FBI: How the Boss PR Men Sold the Bureau to America* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), 124–27.

19. J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), chap. 18; J. Edgar Hoover, *A Study of Communism* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), chap. 11.

20. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 319–20. See also Dianne Kirby, "J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, and the Religious Cold War," in *The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11*, edited by Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman (University of California Press, 2017), 73.

Whereas religious conservatives like Hoover emphasized Bible study, church attendance, and prayer as an antidote to communism, liberals promoted art, poetry, and cinematic innovation to educate Americans on how communism threatened cultural freedom. Liberals believed that communism was best fought by promoting artistic expression.²¹

Hoover, of course, rejected such ideas and believed that Hollywood producers, liberal academics, and civil rights groups were part of the problem. Indeed, they were among the “communist front groups” he had warned about in *Masters of Deceit* and *A Study of Communism*.²² And yet, despite these purported threats, Hoover predicted that Americans would emerge triumphant through their faith and devotion to scripture. “With God’s help,” he averred, “America will remain a land where people still know how to be free and brave.”²³

Hoover had been touting white Christian nationalist tropes for years before he met W. Cleon Skousen, a devout Latter-day Saint who would become one of Mormonism’s most popular writers and professors at Mormon-owned Brigham Young University (BYU).²⁴ It was a quirk of history that brought the two together. Skousen applied to the FBI on a whim, encouraged by a roommate who already worked at the

21. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. and exp. ed. (Basic Books, 2017); Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Basic Books, 2015); Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

22. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 229–30, 237–38; Hoover, *A Study of Communism*, 165–69.

23. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 337.

24. A full-length biography on Skousen has yet to be written, but readers can consult Jo Ann Skousen and Mark Skousen, eds., *There Were Giants in the Land: Episodes in the Life of W. Cleon Skousen* (Ensign, 2023) for context to his life. This book is based on Skousen’s unpublished letters and journal entries.

bureau.²⁵ Skousen quickly garnered the notice of the director and other upper-level administrators, who praised his energy and efficiency. After a sixteen-year tenure, Skousen left in 1951 to take an administrative position at BYU, and Hoover promised he would always have a job at the FBI if he wanted to return.²⁶ Skousen's fondness for the director, nourished by years of close contact with him, was reciprocal. Skousen called Hoover "a great friend and one of the truly superior human beings I have known in my life." Nowhere was this affection revealed more vividly or powerfully than when Skousen expressed "warm admiration" for the director in a book he dedicated to him.²⁷

Their close ties led Skousen to invite Hoover to deliver the commencement address at BYU in 1955. The director carefully considered it because he liked the Mormons. Four years earlier he had attended a concert by BYU singers in the nation's capital, and before that he allowed the Mormons to publish one of his speeches in a church periodical. Hoover also recruited Mormons. He liked their clean-cut, wholesome image—and their courage. He said that the most courageous agent he ever hired was Mormon Samuel Cowley, the son of LDS apostle Matthias F. Cowley, who was killed in a shootout with the notorious bank

25. W. Cleon Skousen, "J. Edgar Hoover as I Knew Him," speech commemorating Hoover's life, Boston, Massachusetts, 1972, in *Favorite Speeches of W. Cleon Skousen*, vol. 1 (Ensign, n.d.), no. 10.

26. C. R. Davidson, memo to Mr. Callahan, subject: W. Cleon Skousen, May 23, 1961, FOIA 61-69602-1, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 68.

27. Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 72; Skousen to Hoover, Apr. 19, 1962, FOIA 94-69602-33, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. The book Skousen dedicated to Hoover is entitled *So You Want to Raise a Boy?* (Doubleday, 1962).

robber George “Baby Face” Nelson.²⁸ But Hoover declined the invitation; he said he was about to retire. Whether this was true or not is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the invitation flattered Hoover, and he told Skousen and the LDS church president, David O. McKay, who supported it, how much he appreciated them taking a “personal interest” in his work. Hoover even sent McKay an autographed copy of *Masters of Deceit*.²⁹

In the midst of trying to get Hoover to Utah, Skousen was busy writing his own book on white Christian nationalism. He had flirted with these ideas since at least 1939 when he published a book entitled *Prophecy and Modern Times*. In it, Skousen told fellow Mormons that the United States had a special destiny. The country’s place in world history had been prophesied in Mormon scripture, for the United States was where, in Skousen’s words, “the gospel” would be “restored” and where Jesus Christ would return to usher in the End Times.³⁰ He called the United States an exceptional nation, with an exceptional Constitution, and an exceptional destiny. Moreover, having come of age in a culture that treated the Constitution as “a fetich,” to borrow the words of historian Michael Kammen, Skousen believed that it was his divinely ordained mission as a Mormon elder to save the Constitution from “secret combinations”—the name of a stealthy group of modern-day

28. See J. Edgar Hoover’s tribute to “Samuel Parkinson Cowley,” Nov. 1, 1971, box 1, folder 11, Samuel P. Cowley Papers, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, UT; “Big Holdup Balked by Nelson’s Death,” *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1934. For Hoover and the BYU singers, see Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 3:389. For Hoover’s published address, see “Men of Tomorrow: The Chief of the ‘G’ Men Talks to Boys,” *Improvement Era* 42, no. 11 (1939): 661, 690, 693–94, 697–98, 701, 703. For the FBI and Mormons, see Matthew Bowman, “A Vast Infiltration: Mormonism and the FBI,” in Johnson and Weitzman, *FBI and Religion*.

29. Hoover to Skousen, March 21, 1958, FOIA 94-47463-35, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; McKay, diary, June 6, 1958, box 10, folder 6, McKay Papers.

30. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 19–41.

communists and socialists prophesied about in the Book of Mormon. Thus, influenced by sacred scripture, Skousen grimly warned that "secret combinations were seeking to overthrow the freedom of all lands, nations and countries." By this, Skousen claimed that Franklin D. Roosevelt and other big-government liberals were destroying the country with their corrosive policies, government welfare programs, and conniving schemes to lift up the poor—all of which risked turning the federal government into a leviathan state.³¹

Skousen expanded on these themes with greater urgency in *The Naked Communist*, published two decades after *Prophecy and Modern Times*. With the Cold War rapidly escalating, Skousen sought to expose the "secret combinations" that he claimed had infiltrated the federal government. He covered much of the same ground as *Masters of Deceit*, published a few weeks earlier in 1958, and arrived at many of the same stark conclusions. Skousen drew on *FBI Reports* and Hoover's public addresses to support his bold claims. The two books were so closely aligned in both tone and temperament that Americans praised them for going "hand in hand." Even national magazines and conservative outlets recognized their similarities and promoted them together. Soon, both books became bestsellers and Skousen was suddenly thrust into the national spotlight.³²

31. Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 251. See also Mary Ann Franks, *The Cult of the Constitution: Our Deadly Devotion to Guns and Free Speech* (Stanford University Press, 2019). Skousen quoted from Ether 8:25 in the Book of Mormon in Skousen, "A History of Secret Combinations," n.d., *Latter-day Saint Conservative*, https://latterdayconservative.com/files/w-cleon-skousen/W_Cleon_Skousen_on_Secret_Combinations_and_Freedom.mp3; see also Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 41–43.

32. John E. Olson Jr. to J. Edgar Hoover, Apr. 19, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-50, Skousen FBI File. For national periodicals extolling the books, see *US News and World Report*, Feb. 2, 1959, and *The Evening Star*, Feb. 14, 1959; Gage, *G-Man*, 512; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 160–61.

Skousen was pleased to ride the director's coattails. Having his book linked with Hoover's not only bolstered sales but also his reputation. In the mid-twentieth century, Hoover was one of the most popular public officials in the United States. His popularity soared during two menacing Red Scares when he ordered his agents to arrest anarchists, communists, and immigrants, feeding off of a wave of American xenophobia.³³ In 1949, his reputation soared even further when *Time* magazine featured him on their cover and when Hollywood producers made a film about him called *Walk East on Beacon*, which offered a flattering depiction of the director and his so-called "G-Men." A 1954 survey indicated that 78 percent of Americans viewed him favorably.³⁴

Skousen shared Hoover's concern that the country was "in serious trouble."³⁵ The rise of global communism, along with the perceived threat of communist subversion at home, troubled him. He accepted Hoover's remedy that only by following biblical precepts and protecting nuclear families could Americans find sanctuary. He also accepted Hoover's belief that Black people were inferior to people of other races. Skousen was reared in a majority white Christian church, run by a majority white male priesthood that privileged a majority white theology, which aligned with Hoover's Christian nationalism. During Skousen's coming-of-age in the church, his Mormon leaders spoke frequently of "inferior races" and "favored lineages," which consigned Black people to the margins in a clearly defined racial hierarchy.

33. Willrich, *American Anarchy*, 298–99, 339–42; Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 40–42, 225–27; Isserman, *Reds*, 29. For Hoover's reputation, along with the Bureau's, see Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), esp. chap. 9.

34. For Hoover, see the cover of *Time* magazine, Aug. 8, 1949. For the film about Hoover, see Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 253. For the FBI in popular culture, see Powers, *G-Men*; and Cecil, *Branding Hoover's FBI*. Gallup survey, May 1954, quoted in Eig, *King*, 392.

35. Unidentified writer to J. Edgar Hoover, Jan. 20, 1971, FOIA 100-106670-389, Martin Luther King Jr. FBI File.

Mormon apostle Bruce R. McConkie bluntly noted that “negroes are not equal with other races,” echoing a well-entrenched Christian view that Black people bore a biblical curse. Labeling Black people this way led Mormon leaders in 1852 to deny them the priesthood and access to the faith’s temples—restrictions that were both important cornerstones and defining markers in the faith’s racial theology.³⁶ Significantly, these white-centered theologies were so tightly ensconced in Mormon culture that some LDS leaders proclaimed that Black people would have to shed their “curse” and revert to their primitive state of whiteness before they could qualify for the “Celestial Kingdom”—the highest degree of salvation in the Mormon afterlife.³⁷

Skousen accepted these teachings uncritically and eagerly promoted them. His writings are studded with biblical references in which he referred to Black people as “the seed of Cain.”³⁸ He also asserted that when dark-skinned people converted to Mormonism they would “no longer be backward, mischievous, and unattractive,” but “white and

36. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Bookcraft, 1958), 477. See also George Q. Cannon, journal, Feb. 1, 1881, George Q. Cannon Papers, LDS Church History Library; Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes*, 5th ed. (1931; Genealogical Society of Utah, 1945), 101, 108–9. The LDS priesthood and temple ban lasted from 1852 to 1978. For the origins of the ban, see W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, 2015), chap. 5. For Christians and race, see Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justifications of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

37. See Matthew L. Harris, *Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 4, 16–17, 71, 189, 311–12; and Matthew L. Harris, “Racialization of Black and Brown Members in Scripture, Prophetic Pronouncement, and Popular Culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” in *Engaging Modernity: Secularism, Culture, and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by Catherine A. Jarvis, Dan Cere, G. Eric Jarvis (McGill-Queen’s University Press, forthcoming).

38. W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Publisher’s Press, 1971), 2239.

delightsome,” by which he meant they would gradually lose their curse, thereby triggering a literal change in their appearance. Skousen’s white supremacy was not just confined to theology. He called Martin Luther King “a top Kremlin agent” and accepted Hoover’s shocking claim that the civil rights leader was a major cog in a vast international communist conspiracy.³⁹

Recognizing that his views would be controversial, Skousen carefully avoided discussing race and civil rights in *The Naked Communist*, though both hovered over the book like a thundercloud. Infused with white Christian nationalist themes, Skousen implored Americans to save the Constitution from communism by reading the Bible daily and keeping the Sabbath day holy. Honoring the “Judaic-Christian code” would “frighten a Communist,” he asserted, and reaffirm the United States as a “god-fearing” Christian nation. Skousen, moreover, implored “strong family solidarity,” for that was the best antidote to fight communists who sought to destroy traditional American values. And lastly, echoing Hoover, he reaffirmed that Christianity was the source of America’s strength: “As parents and teachers, we need to recognize that if this pillar of our culture collapses our own children will be the casualties. This disintegration must stop. George Washington knew what makes us strong; Jefferson knew: ‘This nation, under God, cannot fail!’”⁴⁰

Skousen’s most outrageous claim occurred when he asserted that Harry Hopkins, a close adviser to Franklin D. Roosevelt and one of the chief architects of the New Deal, had sold the nation’s nuclear secrets to the Russians. Skousen also said that KGB agents had infiltrated the US government, posing an existential threat to American institutions. Another bold claim had the Russians stealing the designs of the Sputnik by pilfering top-secret documents from the United States.⁴¹ Years

39. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 54; Skousen, memo to Ernest Wilkinson, Jan. 23, 1970, box 177, folder 16, Wilkinson Papers.

40. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Communist* (Ensign, 1958), 368, 372–73.

41. Skousen, *Naked Communist*, 126, 166–67, 230.

later Skousen would expand on these themes in an equally controversial sequel called *The Naked Capitalist*. There, he drew on longstanding anti-Semitic tropes to posit that a cabal of international bankers had advanced communism to create a "one-world government."⁴²

Skousen failed to provide a shred of evidence, or at least credible evidence, for any of these astonishing claims. To those who knew him, this was not surprising. He always "had a flare for entertaining teaching," recalled David Kennedy, a friend. Another friend, Mormon apostle J. Reuben Clark, called *The Naked Communist* "very entertainingly written."⁴³ Like Hoover, Skousen had mastered the fine art of popularizing anticommunism and was so proud of his work that he sent Hoover a personalized copy. He told the director that he felt "honored to have his work come out about the same time as yours."⁴⁴ Hoover promptly responded, thanking him for sending the "handsomely bound copy" and told Skousen he was "grateful" for his "favorable statements concerning the FBI" and the "Bureau's role in the fight against communism."⁴⁵

Hoover's praise aside, not everyone thought highly of *The Naked Communist*. Some of Skousen's harshest critics came from within the

42. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Capitalist* (Ensign, 1970). For anti-Semitic tropes, see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013), 153–56; Frederic Cople Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 245–46; and Niall Ferguson, *The House of Rothschild: Money's Prophets, 1798–1848* (Penguin, 1999).

43. David M. Kennedy, oral history interview with Gordon Irving, Mar. 22, 1982, 100, Moyle Oral History Program; J. Reuben Clark to W. Cleon Skousen, Mar. 28, 1958, box 403, folder 12, J. Reuben Clark Papers, Perry Special Collections.

44. Skousen to Hoover, Mar. 24, 1958, FOIA 94-69602-38, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

45. Hoover to Skousen, Apr. 2, 1958, FOIA 94-47468-39, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

Mormon community itself. BYU history professor Richard Poll condemned it for its “extreme partisanship” and “inaccurate historical narrative.”⁴⁶ Another critic assailed Skousen for “taking some small fact, blowing it up out of proportion, and presenting it as a fact.” Some resorted to ad hominem attacks: They called him a “nut” and a “charlatan.” Still others found Skousen’s claims fantastical to the point that they were “almost unbelievable.”⁴⁷ Skousen countered his critics by trying to enlist the director’s help. He told Hoover that by attacking him critics were also attacking the director since their books were so closely aligned. The director, however, saw through this ruse and refused to be used this way. Hoover was also irritated when he learned that Skousen told his critics that he was once Hoover’s “top aide,” in what was a clumsy attempt to give his imaginative claims credibility. When word got back to Hoover what Skousen was doing, he instructed his staff to inform his former agent not “to inject the FBI” into political matters. The director testily noted that Skousen had taken advantage “of his former Bureau connection,” which undermined the positive, non-partisan image he sought for the agency.⁴⁸

For their part, Latter-day Saints received *The Naked Communist* with an uneasy mix of excitement and caution, Poll’s critique

46. Skousen to J. Edgar Hoover, June 12, 1962, FOIA 94-47465-58, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Poll’s critique, see “This Trumpet Gives an Uncertain Sound” (1962) and Skousen’s response trying to enlist Hoover’s help (1962), both in FOIA 94-47465-59, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

47. Quimby Melton Sr. to J. Edgar Hoover, Nov. 27, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-63, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; unidentified critic, quoted in “Skousen Convincing, Dangerous; Views Need Considerable Airing,” *Valley News*, n.d., FOIA 94-47468-64, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Rev. Harry H. Feistner to J. Edgar Hoover, May 17, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-54, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

48. Cartha “Deke” DeLoach, memo to John P. Mohr, July 28, 1960, FOIA 94-47468-22, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha “Deke” DeLoach, June 22, 1962, FOIA 94-47465-59, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Hoover’s careful manipulation of the bureau’s image, see Matthew Cecil, *Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau’s Image* (University Press of Kansas, 2014).

notwithstanding. The senior Church leadership urged members to read it, touting it as a useful encapsulation of the dangers the US faced. Skousen's biggest supporters included President McKay and apostle Ezra Taft Benson. McKay's support was expected; after all, he asked Skousen to write it and promoted the book in the Church's general conference. A Cold Warrior himself, McKay had warned repeatedly of communism's menacing effects claiming that it clashed with both scripture and Mormon conceptions of "free agency."⁴⁹ Benson's endorsement was expected too. Not only was he Skousen's close friend, confidante, and collaborator, but he praised him for invoking Hoover—a tactic Benson would later emulate in his own book. Calling Hoover "the best-informed man in the United States on the growing Communist conspiracy," Benson instinctively recognized how the director could benefit Latter-day Saints. In sermons and civic addresses, the apostle implored Latter-day Saints to read *Masters of Deceit*, *A Study in Communism*, and *The Naked Communist* in tandem. In Benson's judgment, these books would help them understand why they had to save the Constitution before it was too late.⁵⁰



49. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 45–46. David O. McKay, *Statements on Communism and the Constitution of the United States* (Deseret Book, 1966); Matthew Bowman, "The Cold War and the Invention of Free Agency," in *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics*, edited by Matthew L. Harris (University of Illinois Press, 2019). Skousen informed J. Edgar Hoover that *The Naked Communist* "came about as the result of an assignment" he received from David O. McKay. Skousen to Hoover, Mar. 12, 1958, FOIA 67-69602-24, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

50. Ezra Taft Benson to Hugh B. Brown, Sept. 18, 1962, box 3, folder 3, Hugh B. Brown Research File, Perry Special Collections; Benson "The Internal Threat Today" (1963), in Ezra Taft Benson, *A Title of Liberty: A Warning Voice*, compiled by Mark A. Benson (Deseret Book, 1964), 33, 40. For Benson's other references to Hoover, see "We Must Be Alerted and Informed" (Dec. 1963) and "Race Against Time" (Dec. 1963), both in Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 42–60, 61–85.

In the fall of 1952, Benson requested a background check from Hoover before he embarked on his government service as the secretary of agriculture. This was not required at the time, but Benson wanted to prove his loyalty.⁵¹ Over the next eight years, the two men would grow close, as both recognized they shared similar values in confronting communism. The apostle was an avid reader of the “FBI Crime Reports”—the special report the Bureau published providing statistics on violent crimes—and he shared the director’s emphasis on “law and order.” Benson, in fact, frequently quoted from the crime reports in his sermons and recommended them to friends.⁵² Most important, he found the director’s warnings that subversives had infiltrated the federal government deeply troubling. “For thirty years,” Benson wrote, “we have aided the cause of atheistic, socialistic communism by permitting communists in high places in government.” He lamented that high-ranking government officials had knowingly “permitted the insidious infiltration of communist agents and sympathizers into almost every segment of American life.”⁵³

To be sure, these were explosive allegations. Benson claimed that Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, Wolf Ladejinsky, and Klaus Fuchs, all one-time federal employees, were subversive, and he even accused one of the men under his employ, Ladejinsky, of being a communist spy. These allegations—some of which proved to be true (Fuchs and

51. J. Edgar Hoover to Ezra Taft Benson, Nov. 24, 1952, FOIA 77-54629-02, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For Benson’s background file, which spans dozens of pages, see FOIA 77-54679-20, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

52. Benson’s collection of the “FBI Crime Reports” can be found in reel 6, Ezra Taft Benson Papers, LDS Church History Library. For Benson quoting from the “FBI Crime Reports,” see Reed A. Benson, comp., *So Shall Ye Reap: Selected Addresses of Ezra Taft Benson* (Deseret Book, 1960), 105, 119, 200–201; Ezra Taft Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, compiled by Jerreld L. Newquist (Parliament Publishers, 1969), 198–99; and Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 26, 70.

53. Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 5. See also Ezra Taft Benson foreword, in John J. Stewart, *Mormonism vs. Communism* (Mercury, 1961), viii.

Hiss were actual Soviet spies)—led Benson to conclude that other communist conspirators lurked within the government, including the agriculture department, where Hiss and Ladejinsky had once worked.⁵⁴ Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy also stoked fear. The tendentious senator claimed that the communist conspiracy was better planned, better organized, and further along than most observers had recognized. Communists and communist sympathizers, he boldly charged, had infiltrated the US State Department, the Hollywood motion picture industry, universities, businesses, and places of worship. His allegations created a whipsaw of suspicion in the nation's capital about who might lean Red. While Eisenhower and Hoover both believed that McCarthy's claims were specious and opportunistic, Benson found the senator credible. McCarthy saw things, Benson later insisted, that no other government official saw.⁵⁵

With the nation ensnared in anticommunist hysteria, Benson's time in Washington had convinced him that the country was imploding from within. One of the culprits destabilizing the country, he asserted, was Martin Luther King, the upstart Baptist minister whom Benson

54. Ezra Taft Benson to H. Roland Tietjen, May 22, 1962, box 7, folder 3, Alumni Association Records, Perry Special Collections; Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 43; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 34–37; Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Little, Brown, and Co., 1998), 179–80; G. Edward White, *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars: The Covert Life of a Soviet Spy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 227–30.

55. Ezra Taft Benson, "McCarthy in Retrospect," June 30, 1977, copy in box 55, folder 1, Leonard J. Arrington Papers, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University. See also Ezra Taft Benson to Robert Welch, Sept. 18, 1967, Ezra Taft Benson Correspondence, John Birch Society Headquarters, Appleton, WI. For Eisenhower and McCarthy, see William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 125–47; and Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (University Press of Kansas, 2006), 89. For Hoover and McCarthy, see Gage, *G-Man*, 433–36; and Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes*, 259–60.

alleged was a pawn of the Kremlin. There is no evidence that Benson's fellow apostles shared this sinister view, but Benson tried repeatedly to win them over to his position. He told them, though he never offered any evidence, that King was the leader of several "communist front groups"—a dubious claim he gleaned from Hoover. Benson called this a "carefully documented fact."⁵⁶

Benson opposed the larger civil rights movement as well, claiming that it was riddled with communist sympathizers. That belief led him to oppose Eisenhower's 1957 civil rights bill and the president's enforcement of the *Brown* decision. Likewise, years after he left the cabinet, Benson revealed his opposition to civil rights in even more stark terms when he accepted an invitation to run on a third-party presidential ticket with Strom Thurmond, one of the nation's most prominent segregationists. When that failed, he asked permission to join a presidential ticket with George Wallace, another strident segregationist, but President McKay told him no. Just as significant, Benson wrote the foreword for a book in which the authors placed a decapitated head of an African American on the front cover. Engraved on the image was a hammer and sickle—the communist symbols representing solidarity between workers and peasants. The book's main message matched Benson's foreword, conveying that communists had infiltrated the civil rights movement.⁵⁷

56. For Benson and communist front groups, see Council of the Twelve Minutes, Nov. 4, 1965, box 64, folder 8, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, LDS Church History Library; Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, 310; and Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 72. King aggressively rebutted these allegations. See "Dr. King Rebutts Hoover's Charges; Offers to Discuss Criticisms—He is Supported by Negro Rights Leaders," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1964; Eig, *King*, 388; Gage, *G-Man*, 604–5.

57. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower*, 239; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 73–76; Newell G. Bringhurst, "Potomac Fever: Continuing Quest for the U.S. Presidency," in Harris, *Thunder from the Right*. Benson, foreword to Wes Andrews and Clyde Dalton, *The Black Hammer: A Study of Black Power, Red Influence, and White Alternatives* (Desco Press, 1967), esp. 13–23. The authors

Like Skousen, Benson's white supremacy flowed from LDS teachings and right-wing politics, which shaped his views on racial equality and the larger civil rights movement. This was never more realized than when white Mormon women complained about sitting next to Black Mormon women at church and Benson retorted that the Black women would need to segregate themselves from the white women.⁵⁸ This segregationist impulse, and his larger views about white supremacy, naturally aligned with Hoover's, and the apostle sought to do all that he could to nurture the relationship. When the popular Mormon Tabernacle Choir, for example, came to Washington, Benson asked Hoover to join his wife at the event (Benson was out of town). On another occasion, he asked the director to hire his son Reed for a position within the bureau. Of course, Hoover appreciated the friendly gestures. He called Benson a "good friend" and kept in regular contact with him during his government service.⁵⁹ When Benson fell ill and was admitted to the hospital to recover from surgery, the director asked Benson "if there was anything we can do to help you." Hoover was equally thoughtful when Benson's stepmother died. "All of us in the FBI are thinking of you in your loss," he assured him. And most telling, when Benson left

write that "Benson generously offered his address as the basis for the introduction to *The Black Hammer*" (13). Benson also opposed sending federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to integrate African American students. See "Benson, Graham Rip Wheat Sale," *Deseret News*, Oct. 28, 1963.

58. Ezra Taft Benson, "Trust Not the Arm of Flesh," *Improvement Era* 70, no. 12 (1967): 55; First Presidency to Ezra Taft Benson, June 23, 1942, in *Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency*, 4 vols. (Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2010), 4:393. See also Kennedy, oral history interview with Irving, 95.

59. Benson to Hoover, Oct. 16, 1958, FOIA 94-38023-17, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, June 18, 1957, FOIA 94-38023-14, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For Hoover and Benson's friendship, see William H. Webster (FBI director) to Ezra Taft Benson, June 29, 1978, FOIA 94-38023-74, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

his cabinet post in 1961, the director sent him a warm note praising him for “years of devoted service.”⁶⁰

If white Christian nationalism shaped their response to the Cold War, Hoover’s uncanny ability to promote its principles is what most impressed Benson. It helped, of course, that he was already well versed in its language. Ever since he was a young man, Benson quoted liberally from Mormon scripture affirming the Constitution was divinely sanctioned. His favorite verse derived from the Doctrine and Covenants—one of four books of Mormon scripture—which publicized the fact that the Constitution “was established under the inspiration of heaven by wise men whom the Lord raised up.”⁶¹ In later writings, Benson called the United States “a choice land” founded “on the truth of Christian principles” and extolled the nation’s Christian roots in even more direct terms to Ronald Reagan: “This nation is the Lord’s base of operations in these latter days. It is where the gospel of Jesus Christ was restored.”⁶²

In the 1950s, as the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* decision, and the Little Rock high school integration crisis convulsed the nation, Benson became singularly focused in promoting white Christian nationalism. The “Mormon elders,” which included himself and Skousen, had to save the Constitution from

60. Hoover to Benson, Oct. 26, 1959, FOIA 94-38023-21, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Oct. 23, 1958, FOIA 94-38023-18, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Jan. 12, 1961, FOIA 94-38023-29, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Nov. 10, 1970, FOIA 94-38023-60, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

61. Benson, address to the general Relief Society Conference, Sept. 28, 1949, in Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 223; D&C 101:79–80. See also Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 28.

62. Benson, *Conference Report*, Oct. 1954, 120; Benson, “America: A Choice Land,” *Improvement Era* 47, no. 11 (1944): 674; Benson to Reagan, May 29, 1984, box 7, Latter-day Saints (Mormons) file, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

liberals demanding racial equality. This is precisely the moment when he sought Hoover's help. After reading *Masters of Deceit*, the apostle became riveted by the book's core message, which prompted him to invite Hoover to Utah to speak to Latter-day Saints. An FBI memo captured the substance of the request: "Benson is a Mormon, and he has asked the Director to speak on a number of occasions and has invited him to programs presented by different organizations in that church."⁶³ Benson also invited the director to speak to the "All American Society"—an anticommunist organization in Salt Lake City that Skousen founded. Hoover turned both requests down; he was busy.⁶⁴

When Benson failed to get Hoover to Salt Lake City, he decided to write his own book popularizing anticommunism, doing essentially what Skousen had done in *The Naked Communist*. In 1962, a year after his government service ended, Benson published *The Red Carpet*. Included in its pages were a dizzying array of quotes from *Masters of Deceit* that nearly overwhelmed the text. Calling Hoover "fearless and distinguished," he wanted Mormons to know that Jesus Christ was the only way to save the nation from "godless communism." Quoting Hoover repeatedly, Benson wrote that "our faith in democracy and our fellow man is rooted in a belief in a Supreme Being," declaring that "Christian principles . . . made this nation great." From that reasoning, he proclaimed that American democracy and capitalism was rooted in "a belief in a Supreme Being." Americans, he said, had to "serve the God of this land, who is Jesus Christ. There is no other course of safety."⁶⁵

In this lively book, Benson kept the focus squarely on the welfare state, claiming that the nation's fiscal policies were slowly plunging the

63. Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, Nov. 10, 1959, FOIA 94-58023-24, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

64. Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, memo John P. Mohr, Sept. 18, 1961, FOIA 94-38023-33, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

65. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Red Carpet, Socialism—The Royal Road to Communism* (Bookcraft, 1962), 55–56, 298–99.

country into economic ruin. Not only were welfare programs unconstitutional, he reasoned, but they led to a dangerous concentration of power that put the United States on the “royal road” to communism.”⁶⁶ The worried apostle implored Americans to understand that this was un-American and that basic political and economic rights in the United States were rooted in a “fundamental belief in God.” The last page of the book tied in neatly all the themes that he had articulated in *The Red Carpet*. He quoted from a creed utilized by former presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Herbert Hoover entitled “The American Way of Life.” It listed over a dozen political and economic rights for Americans, but it read more like a religious manifesto linking free market capitalism with the divine. What is striking is how Benson equated American rights with Jesus Christ, whom he averred was central to “The American Way of Life.”⁶⁷

Invoking Jesus Christ, of course, was not unusual in the Cold War years. Scores of conservative businessmen, clergy, and politicians promoted a white Christian nationalist culture that fused free market economics with a biblicist worldview. Here they wanted to assure a secular world of America’s fidelity to Christianity, capitalism, and democracy. Their biggest accomplishment was putting “In God We Trust” on the nation’s currency and formally codifying “One Nation Under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. With the nation’s capital awash in religious symbolism, Benson had simply capitalized on this by linking anticommunism to Christianity and laissez-faire capitalism. Proud of his work, he sent Hoover a copy of *The Red Carpet* with an inscription that read: “To J. Edgar Hoover—Distinguished American

66. Benson, *Red Carpet*, 83.

67. Benson, *Red Carpet*, 321. For background and context to “The American Way of Life,” see Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 70–71.

patriot and courageous defender of our freedom.”⁶⁸ It must have pleased the director when his agents reviewed the book and wrote: “Benson . . . makes numerous favorable references to the Director and quotes extensively from *Masters of Deceit*, as well as from articles and speeches by the Director.”⁶⁹

A few years later Benson touted these themes again, in what was his most forceful address to date on white Christian nationalism. He titled it “The Christ and the Constitution” and urged “Christian Constitutionalists” to save American democracy from communism. He offered five suggestions to preserve the nation’s “Christian Constitutional legacy.” The first was “spirituality.” Americans could only “remain free” as long as they worshipped “the God of the land—Jesus Christ.” Second, they needed “balance.” “A man has duties to his church, home, country, and profession.” Third, they needed “courageous action”—that is, they needed to join “those valiant patriots of the John Birch Society” to pool their efforts to fight the enemy. Fourth, they needed to be educated. This meant studying the Bible and patriotic literature like *American Opinion* magazine—an official Birch publication—that would amplify “crucial concerns to free men.” And lastly, they had to “be prepared.” “A man should not only be prepared to protect himself physically, but he should have on hand sufficient supplies to sustain himself and his

68. The inscription can be found in an unidentified FBI memo of Apr. 18, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-42, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Apr. 20, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-39, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For conservatives, free-market economics, and religion, see Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, esp. 102–4, 240–42; Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and especially Matthew Avery Sutton, “Redefining the History and Historiography of American Evangelicalism in the Era of the Religious Right,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 92, no. 1 (2024): 37–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfae063>.

69. R. W. Smith, memo to William Sullivan, May 17, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-42, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

family in an emergency.” In the closing pages, Benson called on every American citizen to be a “Christian Constitutionalist.” They had to look to “Christ and the Constitution” to save them.⁷⁰

By the mid-1960s, as Black Power militants, a burgeoning feminist movement, and a vibrant anti-Vietnam War counterculture roiled the nation, Benson felt that the nation needed Hoover’s message more than ever. He would start with his own church. First, Benson tried to get Hoover’s writings into the Church’s adult priesthood manual that Skousen had written. He wanted the Church’s white patriarchy to be educated on communist tactics and methods. But some apostles opposed it. They feared that criticizing communism and socialism would stymie the Church’s missionary efforts, especially as Church leaders tried to proselytize behind the Iron Curtain.⁷¹ Second, Benson tried to get Hoover to speak in the LDS Church general conference, but he declined. Third, Benson requested permission from Hoover for Deseret Book, the Church’s publishing house, to publish his speeches. Hoover declined again.⁷²

Benson did have luck, however, convincing Hoover to allow the Church to publish two of his speeches.⁷³ Hoover’s 1947 article “God and

70. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Christ and the Constitution,” *American Opinion*, Dec. 1964, 41–45, copy in box 21, folder 29, John Birch Society Records, University Archives, Brown University, Providence, RI. Benson delivered a slightly revised version of this address in the LDS church general conference and changed the title to “Prepare, Then Fear Not,” *Improvement Era* 70, no. 6 (1967): 57–60.

71. See First Presidency Minutes, Nov. 19, 1965, box 61, folder 4, and Apr. 18, 1968, box 67, folder 4, both in McKay Papers. Skousen titled his proposed course of study “The Perfect Law of Liberty”; copy in box 1, folder 4, Hugh W. Nibley Papers, Perry Special Collections. For Skousen as the author of “The Perfect Law of Liberty,” see Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 316–17.

72. Milton A. Jones, memo to Robert E. Wick, Apr. 13, 1966, FOIA 94-38023-58, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

73. Benson to Hoover, Oct. 22, 1965, and Hoover’s reply, Nov. 4, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-54, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

Country or Communism" was republished in a 1966 Church periodical, which presented Mormons with a stark option: They could either embrace "Communism—the scourge of our generation," along with its militant "atheism," or they could embrace "a theistic philosophy which holds sacred the dignity of each human being." Sprinkled throughout the text were quotes from the Bible leaving readers with an unambiguous conclusion as to which religion he was referring. Benson followed up this article with another one of Hoover's. In 1968, with Hoover's consent, the Church published "The Evils of Obscene Materials," which attacked pornography as one of the nation's scourges.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, in 1967 and 1968, as race riots erupted in dozens of American cities, Benson and Skousen alleged that "Black Marxists" had planned them. The riots were, in their judgment, the fulfillment of prophecy in Mormon scripture—the result of "secret combinations" colluding with civil rights groups to thwart freedom. The vigilant apostle called this ruse a "tool of communist deception" and vowed to expose their tactics and methods. With the country mired in racial discontent, Benson and Skousen turned again to Hoover.⁷⁵ Hoover's teachings, they reasoned, would benefit college students, especially at BYU, a majority white institution, where they feared that Mormon students might align

74. Hoover, "God and Country or Communism," *Improvement Era* 69, no. 1 (1966): 17, 47; Hoover, "The Evils of Obscene Materials," *Improvement Era* 71, no. 5 (1968): 15. See also McKay, diary, Oct. 21, 1965, box 61, folder 2, McKay Papers.

75. Peter B. Levy, *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 124–26, 165; Benson, "Erosion of America" (May 13, 1968), in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 7. For Skousen and Benson's views on Black Marxists fomenting race riots across the United States, see Benson, "Civil Rights—Tool of Communist Deception," in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 13; and Skousen, "The Communist Attack on the Mormons," March 1970, National Research Group, American Fork, UT. For their views on "secret combinations," see Benson, "Civic Standards for Faithful Saints," *Utah Independent*, Apr. 14, 1972, 4; Skousen, "History of Secret Combinations."

with civil rights groups. In 1971, the anxious duo made a final appeal to get the director to Utah. Benson read one of Hoover's recent addresses and hoped that "it might appear in every magazine in America and every newspaper." He used the address as a pretext to invite Hoover to give it at BYU. The director declined.⁷⁶

Hoover never told Benson and Skousen why he kept rebuffing them, but when Benson's and Skousen's FBI files became available to researchers in 2010, his reasons were clear. In 1961, only months after Benson's government service ended, he and Skousen began to affiliate with the John Birch Society—an anticommunist advocacy group that peddled far-out conspiracy theories. The Birchers shot to prominence in the 1960s when they claimed that communists had infiltrated the United Nations, that Black and Jewish leaders were communist sympathizers, that the space program was funded and orchestrated by communists, and that communists had assassinated John F. Kennedy because he was not aggressive enough in pursuing civil rights. None of these allegations, however, rose to the level of audaciousness as when Birch founder Robert Welch branded American statesman George C. Marshall a communist, along with Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and President Eisenhower and his inner circle of advisers, which included the secretary of state, the CIA director, and other notable figures. Distraught over Eisenhower's failure to curtail Franklin Roosevelt's liberal New Deal programs, Welch took to the pages of *The Politician*, his signature book, to attack him. He called the president and his inner circle "conscious, dedicated agent[s] of the communist conspiracy."⁷⁷ As one might expect, these extraordinary claims were

76. Benson to Hoover, Nov. 19, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-66, and Hoover's reply, Nov. 24, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-69, both in Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

77. Robert Welch, *The Politician*, unpublished manuscript, 1958, 267. For Bircher conspiracy theories, see Dallek, *Birchers*, 33–35, 108–9; Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life*, 5–8, 161–65; Mulloy, *World of the John Birch Society*, 33–34, 123–30.

met with extraordinary resistance, not least from Hoover himself, who hotly noted, "Anybody who will allege that General Eisenhower was a Communist agent has something seriously wrong with him."⁷⁸

Hoover was not alone in finding Welch unhinged. A 1963 poll revealed that only 5 percent of the 1,250 adults surveyed held a favorable view of the Birch Society. Even the conservative senator Barry Goldwater, the GOP's 1964 presidential nominee, influential right-wing pundit William F. Buckley, and other prominent conservatives condemned the Birch founder, dismissing him as a "credible observer of political reality."⁷⁹ For them, Welch's conspiracy theories had no place in the Republican Party. There was nothing to be gained by vilifying an American hero like Eisenhower or his cabinet, or casting aspersions on elected officials with whom they disagreed. The Birchers' conspiracy theories, they argued, would not neutralize communism or curtail big government or return the nation to God. They were distractions at best, at worst a launching pad for anti-Semitism and anti-Black vitriol. Thus, mainstream conservatives did not want to be aligned with the Birchers, even though they shared a common concern about the expanding welfare state, labor unions, communism, and civil rights. (They opposed the latter for federal reasons—not because of communist subversion.)⁸⁰

78. Benson to Hoover, June 15, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-51, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; J. Edgar Hoover testimony before the Warren Commission, Nov. 23, 1964, in *Hearings before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, 26 vols. (US Government Printing Office, 1964), 5:101.

79. John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 167; David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 71.

80. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 167; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 76–77; Steven Hahn, *Illiberal America: A History* (W. W. Norton, 2024), 271; Farber, *Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 71, 105; and Matthew Continetti, *The Right: The Hundred Year War for American Conservatism* (Basic Books, 2022), 155–57.

Most mainstream conservatives, rather, leaned into Hoover's white Christian nationalism to oppose communism, which consisted of Bible literacy, staunch church attendance, and reaffirmation of the nation's Christian roots. They viewed Welch and other far-right ideologues as "fright peddlers," "apostles of hate and fear" and part of a "paranoid style in American politics." Buckley called them "the Loonies," and mainstream news outlets deliberately avoided giving them air time.⁸¹ And while their conspiracy theories failed to gain acceptance among mainstream conservatives at the time—a fact that would dramatically change by the early twenty-first century—Benson and Skousen eagerly defended the society.⁸² When, for instance, criticism of the society soared in the mid-1960s, they doubled down to defend it. During a national swell against the conspiracy organization, Benson sent Hoover a copy of *The Politician*, declaring that he would "never know in this life why [Eisenhower] gave help to the conspiracy." He also sent letters to scores of elected officials—and to Eisenhower himself—defending the Birch Society as a patriotic organization. Skousen, equally outspoken, stoutly defended the Birch leader in a widely circulated pamphlet, downplaying Welch's conspiracy theories as just an "opinion" that was "never part of the Society's policies or principles."⁸³

81. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 167–68; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1965); Carl T. Bogus, *Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism* (Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 174.

82. For this point, see Dallek, *Birchers*, 15. For an opposing viewpoint arguing that mainstream conservatives and far-right ideologues built a coalition since at least the 1930s, see David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024).

83. Benson to Hoover, May 28, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-49, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; W. Cleon Skousen, *The Communist Attack on the John Birch Society* (Ensign, 1963), 8, copy in box 23, folder 14, Birch Society Records. Benson to Eisenhower, Dec. 9, 1965, Principal File, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KA; Benson to Richard Nixon, Dec. 9, 1965, box 3, Ezra Taft

Declassified FBI memos reveal that, even though the director "had very cordial relations" with Benson and Skousen in the past, their allegiance to the John Birch Society had shattered their relationship.⁸⁴ When they spoke at Birch rallies in the early 1960s touting Welch's conspiracy theories, it infuriated Hoover. And when Skousen tried to cash in on his fame by representing himself as Hoover's "top aide" during his bureau employment, it sparked a blizzard of letters to FBI headquarters from skeptical Americans demanding to know if it was true. Some of these skeptics had clout. Admiral Chester Ward, a US Navy judge advocate, asked Hoover about his former agent even though he had already formed his own opinion. After hearing Skousen speak, Ward called him an "unprincipled racketeer in anticommunism," "money mad," and one "who is doing anything and everything to exploit the subject."⁸⁵ Skousen's antics also angered Hoover, and he told inquisitors that his former agent was not a top aide but a low level "clerical employee" he barely knew. Benson fared just as poorly. Hoover hid in his office anytime the former secretary or his son Reed visited Washington seeking a meeting. His aides counseled Hoover to avoid his old friend: "It is not

Benson folder, Wilderness Years: series I:S, subseries A: 1963–1965, series 238, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.

84. DeLoach, memo to Jones, Nov. 10, 1959; Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, Nov. 9, 21, 1962, FOIA 77-54679-40, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; G. E. Malmfeldt, memo to Tom Bishop, Aug. 22, 1968, FOIA 94-47469-88, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. See also Jones, memo to Wick, Apr. 13, 1966.

85. Ward's response is conveyed in William C. Sullivan, memo to Alan H. Belmont, Jan. 2, 1963, FOIA 97-69602-338, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Skousen's speeches on the Birch speaker's circuit, see Lee C. White, "Confidential Memorandum #9," John Birch Society Propaganda, Civil Rights during the Kennedy Administration, 1961–1963, part 3, The Civil Rights Files of Lee C. White, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. For Benson's speeches at Birch functions, see "Let Us Live to Make Men Free" (Sept. 28, 1963), in Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 1–21; and "Strength for Battle" (July 4, 1966), in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 4.

believed that the Director should take time to schedule to meet with Mr. Benson.”⁸⁶

Despite shunning them, though, Benson and Skousen remained unremittingly loyal to Hoover. In 1971, when he came under heavy scrutiny for his involvement in COINTELPRO—a controversial FBI counterintelligence program that targeted civil rights activists—the pair blithely defended him despite newspapers publishing hard evidence that Hoover had violated the Constitution by illegally wiretapping civil rights leaders.⁸⁷ Characteristically, Benson and Skousen rushed to Hoover’s defense, impervious to the new facts that just came to light. To President Nixon, Benson wrote: “I have noted with deep concern the reoccurring attacks on that truly great American, J. Edgar Hoover. . . . I know of no finer example of patriotism, devoted public service, and far-seeing imaginative management of our most vital agency, the FBI, than he has given. To me, he is a symbol of the best there is in America.” Benson echoed the same sentiments to BYU students and at the faith’s general conference. He even titled one of his books *God, Family, and Country* after one of Hoover’s addresses. Skousen, likewise, defended the director. He told Latter-day Saints that Hoover was “the most

86. J. Edgar Hoover to Mark J. Stewart, Nov. 13, 1961, FOIA 97-69602-317, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Milton A. Jones, memo to Tom Bishop, Nov. 11, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-66, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

87. Betty Medsger and Ken Clawson, “Stolen Documents Describe FBI Surveillance Activities,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 24, 1971; “Mitchell Issues Pleas on F.B.I. Files: Asks Press Not to Publish Date on Stolen Papers,” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 1971; and especially Betty Medsger, *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover’s Secret FBI File* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). For COINTELPRO, see J. Edgar Hoover, memo to FBI Field Offices, August 25, 1967, FOIA 100-448006, COINTELPRO FBI File. See also Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*, 264–65; Gage, *G-Man*, 583–84, 608–13; Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 182–90; Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), 210–11.

outstanding public official that we've had in the United States Government in our time." He was "a great man."⁸⁸

Their blinkered allegiance to Hoover led them to overlook his faults. When Benson was ordained LDS Church president in 1985, for instance, he was still praising Hoover, even though the director had been dead for nearly thirteen years.⁸⁹ In fact, during his presidency, Benson delivered a steady stream of sermons touting white Christian nationalism, much of which echoed Hoover. With the Cold War still raging, Benson seized on the Constitution's bicentennial in 1987 to remind Latter-day Saints that God had sanctioned the Constitution as a precondition for the Mormon gospel to flourish. In a well-publicized address, he called the Constitution a "sacred document" and avowed that "its words were akin to the revelations of God." Notably, Benson implored Latter-day Saints to fight government programs that were sapping Americans of their "constitutional freedoms." Benson, as with other illiberals and conservatives, became alarmed when President Reagan failed to eradicate Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson's welfare programs, fearing that these programs were hastening the country's descent into communism. Of even greater consequence,

88. Benson to Richard Nixon, May 12, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-63, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History" (1977), in Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Deseret Book, 1979), 23; "The Inside of 'Mr. FBI'—Interview: W. Cleon Skousen," *BYU Daily Universe*, May 4, 1972; W. Cleon Skousen lecture at BYU, "Know the Truth to Stay Free," 1971, transcript in author's possession; Skousen, "J. Edgar Hoover As I Knew Him." See also Ezra Taft Benson to Clarence Kelly, June 4, 1976, FOIA 94-38023-71, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. Benson's book Hoover inspired is entitled *God, Family, and Country—Our Three Great Loyalties* (Deseret Book, 1974).

89. See Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon is the Word of God," address to the Annandale Stake Conference, Annandale, VA, January 5, 1986, copy in box 199, folder 1, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Benson alleged that “the number of agencies” who run these programs were growing at a staggering rate under Reagan’s watch. “What many fail to realize is that most of these federal agencies are unconstitutional,” he complained. For Benson, the remedy was simple: Mormons had to “save the Constitution” by electing conservatives to public office who would end the welfare state.⁹⁰

Benson remained conspicuously silent on the role of Black people in saving the Constitution. While the LDS Church’s priesthood and temple restriction was lifted in 1978—a position Benson initially opposed then came to support—there is no evidence that he envisioned a role for Black people in Church governance. And whereas two decades earlier he condemned the civil rights movement for its alleged communist ties, now he kept quiet. His fellow apostles pressured him, convincing him that branding civil rights supporters communists was harming the Church’s missionary efforts in majority Black countries.⁹¹ Nevertheless, even as Benson accepted modest efforts to welcome Black people in the Church, he refused to support the Martin Luther King

90. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner* (Deseret Book, 1986), 11, 25, 30–31; Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon is the Word of God,” Regional Representatives Seminar, Salt Lake City, UT, Apr. 4, 1986, quoted in *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Bookcraft, 1988), 56. For conservative disillusionment with government welfare programs, see Continetti, *The Right*, 290–92; Hahn, *Illiberal America*, 302; Julian E. Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (Penguin, 2015), 322–24. For the persistence of New Deal welfare programs, see Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (Yale University Press, 2021), 175–78.

91. Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, chap. 7. Helvécio Martins, a Black Brazilian, was called to be a general authority in 1990 when Benson was president. However, Thomas Monson, his counselor, issued the call—and it is unknown whether Benson supported the move since his health was rapidly declining. For Martins, see Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 274–75. For efforts to crackdown on Benson, see Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 65–66, 88–89, 102–3.

federal holiday, which prompted some Black Latter-day Saints to scoff that he never purged himself of anti-Black racism.⁹²

Skousen, too, continued to invoke Hoover. In the 1970s, the former FBI agent founded an anticommunist organization called the Freeman Institute (it later morphed into the National Constitution Center), which incorporated many of Hoover's teachings in its founding charter. Under the aegis of the institute, Skousen and his conservative allies traveled the country giving lectures about the Constitution in a program billed "The Miracle of America." Although Skousen claimed that the speakers would "make it easier for everyone to gain a greater understanding of the Constitution," the lectures were nothing more than thinly disguised ideological tracts advancing the principles of white Christian nationalism.⁹³ They drew interest from a diverse cross-section of people, including the Rev. Jerry Falwell, one of the country's most prominent evangelical ministers (and himself an enthusiast of white Christian nationalism). He "warmly endorsed our program," Skousen proudly noted. Similarly, Ted Turner, the founder of the prominent cable news network CNN, was "very impressed" with "The Miracle of America" and pledged support. Congressman Larry McDonald, a Bircher, also

92. Chester Lee Hawkins, oral history interview with Alan Cherry, Mar. 1, 1985, 22–23, African American Oral History Project, Perry Special Collections. See also Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 259–60; and Matthew L. Harris and Madison S. Harris, "The Last State to Honor Dr. King: Utah and the Quest for Racial Justice," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2020): 5–21.

93. W. Cleon Skousen to "Fellow Patriots," Oct. 1984, box 1, folder 3, Freeman Institute Records, 1963–1980, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

attended the lectures, as did other members of Congress. Even Ronald Reagan offered warm praise of Skousen's work.⁹⁴

Skousen managed to bundle his lectures in a book entitled *The Five Thousand Year Leap* (1981), in which he asserted that the Bible was at "the heart and soul of American political philosophy." He posited that Anglo-Saxons and "ancient Israelites" had influenced the Constitution, yet overlooked the fact that no direct evidence tied the Founders to the Bible at the Constitutional Convention.⁹⁵ Furthermore, he claimed, anachronistically, that the Founders supported prayer in public schools, clearly perturbed by a 1962 Supreme Court ruling that outlawed it: "The Founding Fathers would have counted this a serious mistake." Four years later, on the eve of the Constitution's bicentennial, he published *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution*. He asserted that the nation was drifting away from the Founders' principles of faith and free markets. "It would be a disastrous loss to all

94. For Falwell and the Freeman Institute, see box 18, folder 37B, Jerry Falwell Papers, Liberty University Archives, The Jerry Fawell Library, Lynchburg, VA. For McDonald and the Freeman Institute, see box 124, "Freemen Institute" folder, Lawrence Patton McDonald Congressional Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. See also Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 334–35, 354–59, 368–69, 382–83, 397–98.

95. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap: Great Ideas That Are Changing the World* (National Constitutional Studies, 1981), 15, 92. For the Founders and the Constitutional Convention, see Matthew L. Harris and Thomas S. Kidd, eds., *The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion in Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3; and Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 9.

humanity if these great principles were allowed to become neglected or lost," Skousen wrote.⁹⁶

Skousen also remained ambivalent about Black people following the Church's new priesthood and temple inclusion policies. He ostensibly supported priesthood ordination for Black men, but he never sermonized on it or publicly endorsed it. And, while he helped to convert former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver to Mormonism in the early 1980s, he did not believe the Church or the government should address systemic injustices relegating people like Cleaver to second-class citizenship. Civil rights, Skousen declared, was for people who needed "to be secure in their lives, their property and their privacy," which presumably meant white people, since not even decades of oppression against Black people were enough to convince him that the government had a role to play in addressing racial injustices.⁹⁷ If Black people wanted to be respected in their churches and communities, he stated, they would have to do it on their own through education and entrepreneurship. (This is precisely what the famed Black leader Booker T. Washington taught.) Not surprisingly, and perhaps to the shock of no one, Skousen continued to oppose the Martin Luther King federal

96. Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*, 256; W. Cleon Skousen, *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution*, 2nd ed. (National Center for Constitution Studies, 1985), ix.

97. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Third Thousand Years* (Bookcraft, 1964), 620. For Cleaver's conversion to Mormonism, see Newell G. Bringham, "Eldridge Cleaver and W. Cleon Skousen: Mormonism's Odd Couple," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 43, no. 1 (2023): 133–47; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 348–51; and Justin Gifford, *Revolution or Death: The Life of Eldridge Cleaver* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2020), 263–65.

holiday. Like Hoover and Benson, he never wavered in his belief that King was a communist.⁹⁸



The Cold War came to an abrupt end in 1989, yet Benson's (d. 1994) and Skousen's (d. 2006) legacies remain as vibrant as ever in the Mormon community. Hoover remains influential as well, his voice still flickering through the writings of Benson and Skousen. Collectively, their views have influenced a new generation of Mormon politicians, writers, artists, as well as preppers consumed with the End Times. These range from Utah Senator Mike Lee to preppers Lori and Chad Daybell to radio and TV personality Glenn Beck.⁹⁹

The most prominent Latter-day Saints to embrace white Christian nationalism include artist Jon McNaughton and former Homeland

98. Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*, 108–9, 231–32; W. Cleon Skousen and R. Stephen Pratt, "Reverend King's Ministry: Thirteen Years of Crisis," *Freemen Digest*, Jan. 1984, 15–20. See also Willard Woods, "Martin Luther King Day," *Freemen Digest*, Jan. 1984, 21–24; and Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

99. Sean Wilentz, "Confounding Fathers," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 18, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/confounding-fathers>; Jeffrey Rosen, "Radical Constitutionalism," *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 26, 2010, 34; Franks, *The Cult of the Constitution*, 53–54; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 119–25. For LDS writers quoting Benson and Skousen, see Jerreld L. Newquist, comp., *Prophets, Principles and National Survival* (Publisher's Press, 1964); Richard Vetterli, *The Constitution by a Thread* (Paramount Publishers, 1967); Jerome Horowitz, *The Elders of Israel and the Constitution* (Parliament Publishers, 1970); H. Verland Andersen, *The Book of Mormon and the Constitution*, compiled by Hans V. Andersen (Sunrise Publishing, 1995); Jack Monnett, *Awaking To Our Awful Situation: Warnings from the Nephite Prophets* (Nauvoo House Publishing, 2006). For the Daybells, see Leah Sottile, *When the Moon Turns to Blood: Lori Vallow, Chad Daybell, and a Story of Murder, Wild Faith, and End Times* (Twelve, 2022).

Security agent Timothy Ballard. McNaughton's paintings depict White Mormon leaders saving the Constitution from the "scourge" of Barack Obama's presidency, which is a troubling reminder of how white Christian nationalism has seeped into the Mormon community. His paintings, ever popular among ultraconservative Mormons, capitalized on the Tea Party movement to present his white-centered art as a foil to the nation's first African American president.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Ballard, who founded "Operation Underground Rescue" purportedly to save children from sex trafficking, cashed in on his fame when he published ultra-patriotic books on George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in which he linked them to Mormon exceptionalist tropes, where white Christian nationalism ideologies dance around the edges.¹⁰¹

What is most disturbing, though, is the extent to which Latter-day Saints have embraced white Christian nationalism—which offers both a witness and a warning to the power of Benson and Skousen's enduring influence. A 2023 poll from the Pew Research Center revealed that four in ten Latter-day Saints identify with white Christian nationalism. The poll came shortly after right-wing zealots, in support of former

100. See Jennifer A. Greenhill, "Trump's Court Artist," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 13, 2019; and Jon McNaughton, *The Art of Jon McNaughton: Images of an American Artist* (McNaughton Fine Art). See also Benjamin E. Park "The Unlikely Alliance of Mormonism and Christian Nationalism," *Journal of Media and Religion* 23, no. 1–4 (2024): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2024.2395227>; Nicholas Shrum, "Mormon-American Nationalism and the Religiopolitical Art of Jon McNaughton," *Journal of Mormon History* 50, no. 2 (2024): 43–77; and Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

101. Park, "Unlikely Alliance," 6–7. Shannon Power, "'Sound of Freedom' Inspires Donald Trump's New Policy," *Newsweek*, Nov. 9, 2023; Anne Branigin and Herb Scribner, "Tim Ballard, of 'Sound of Freedom' Fame, Accused of Sexual Misconduct," *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 2023. For Ballard's books, see *The Lincoln Hypothesis* (Deseret Book, 2014); *The Washington Hypothesis* (Deseret Book, 2016).

president Donald Trump's disgraced effort to overturn the 2020 election, stormed the capitol on January 6, 2021, to prevent the peaceful transition of power.¹⁰² Among the supporters were Latter-day Saints, but they were not alone, neither in their embrace of Trump nor in their support of white Christian nationalism. As the Pew poll indicates, and as recent scholarship attests, Evangelicals and mainline Protestants have seen white Christian nationalism surge in their faith communities. These sects not only oppose LGBTQ+ and immigration rights, but they support voter suppression tactics aimed to keep Black and Brown Americans from voting.¹⁰³

Ironically, as a startling number of Latter-day Saints identify with white Christian nationalism, Mormon leaders have taken measures in the opposite direction. First, they repudiated their longstanding race theology on the Church's website. Second, they denounced white supremacy in a sharply worded public relations statement. Third, they gave millions of dollars to the NAACP to fight racial inequality. Fourth, they denounced racial bigotry in their sermons and writings. And fifth, and most important, they have distanced the Church from the fiery Cold War rhetoric of Benson and Skousen, which includes all mention

102. For the poll, see "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture," PRRI, Feb. 8, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>. For the 2020 election, see Lawrence Lessig and Matthew Seligman, *How to Steal a Presidential Election* (Yale University Press, 2024).

103. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Emerson and Bracey II, *Religion of Whiteness*; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*. See also the incisive essays in Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Donald Trump: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton University Press, 2022); and Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

of Mormon elders "saving the Constitution."¹⁰⁴ With the current church membership now at seventeen million, and with most of its members living outside of the United States, Church leaders have rejected white Christian nationalism in order to make the Church more inclusive of its global membership.

104. Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 313–15; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, chap. 5. For Latter-day Saints' political views, see David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a broader discussion about how Latter-day Saint political views have evolved over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Benjamin E. Park, *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism* (Liveright, 2024).

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