



Abraham Lincoln and his son Tad are shown looking at a photographic album in this studio portrait taken by Mathew Brady on February 4, 1864. This is the only known close-up photograph showing Lincoln wearing spectacles. (Library of Congress)



CHAPTER 4

Mary Jane Woodger

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE MORMONS

In early June of 1863, Brigham Young sent Mormon convert and journalist Thomas B. H. Stenhouse to transact Church business in Washington, DC, and to ascertain what policy President Abraham Lincoln would pursue in regard to the Mormons. At this time, Stenhouse was an active Church member and an assistant editor of the *Deseret News*. Stenhouse “had a wide reputation throughout America and [had] journalistic contact with hundreds of editors east and west with whom he was personally acquainted.”¹ When Stenhouse asked Lincoln about his intentions in regard to the Mormon situation, Lincoln reportedly responded: “Stenhouse, when I was a boy on the farm in Illinois there was a great deal of timber on the farm which we had to clear away. Occasionally we would come to a log which had fallen down. It was too hard to split, too wet to burn, and too heavy to move, so we plowed around it. You go back and tell Brigham Young that if he will let me alone I will let him alone.”²

George A. Hubbard, who has done extensive research on this subject, sees this incident

as “the real turning point in the Mormon attitude toward President Lincoln.” Hubbard suggests, “This was precisely the kind of governmental policy which the Mormons had sought in vain” since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized thirty-three years earlier.³ During his tenure as president of the United States, Lincoln influenced the history of the Church when his path intersected with the Mormons. Hubbard added, “It was the political activities of both Lincoln and the Mormons that brought them into contact with each other.”⁴ Lincoln’s political career from 1834 to 1860 centered in the area of Springfield, Illinois, about 120 miles southeast of Nauvoo. As a lawyer, a member of the Illinois State Legislature, and finally the chief executive of the nation, Lincoln filled key positions which inherently involved interaction with LDS Church leaders. Lincoln’s attitude of restraint and even unconcern toward the Mormons became important in the history of the Church during the Civil War when he was president. Such an attitude may have been in part because of his

associations with Latter-day Saints during his early political career.

As Brigham Young was establishing communities in the West, Lincoln made several executive decisions that affected their lives and history. Lincoln is known for his ability to value people despite individual differences, a characteristic that led to generous decisions in his assessment of the Latter-day Saints. He could have demanded that a moral high ground be maintained in his positions; instead, he consistently took a stance of toleration.

NAUVOO

As the Saints moved into Hancock County, Illinois, beginning in the spring of 1839, Hancock County leaned toward the Whig Party. In both the 1836 and 1838 elections, Hancock County voted overwhelmingly Whig.⁵ However, both political parties welcomed the Mormons and energetically tried to secure their support.⁶ Although Stephen A. Douglas was in his twenties during the late 1830s and early 1840s, he was seen as the foremost Democrat in the area.⁷ In December 1839, Lincoln and Douglas had first debated each other and repeatedly faced one another across Illinois in the spring and summer of 1840 as they campaigned for each party's presidential nominee: Lincoln for Whig William Henry Harrison, and Douglas for Democrat Martin Van Buren. Political historian and Douglas biographer Robert W. Johansen observed that Douglas immediately befriended the Church

leaders when the Mormons emigrated from Missouri in 1838. At the time, he lived in nearby Quincy and served as the circuit court judge in the Fifth Judicial Circuit, which included Hancock County.⁸

According to Johanssen, Douglas also emphasized that the Mormons had their "right to worship God as [they pleased]," while Lincoln was seen as somewhat irreligious.⁹ Lincoln once observed, "It was every where contended that no ch[r]istian ought to go for me, because I belonged to

no church, was suspected of being a deist, and had talked about fighting a duel."¹⁰ Though the 1840s saw the tail end of the Second Great Awakening, launched about fifty years earlier, the general climate created social pressure to join a church. Remaining religiously unattached created a political disadvantage for Lincoln, who distanced himself from organized religion and generally refused to discuss his beliefs.¹¹

As Hubbard observes, "The Mormon vote at this time virtually assured the outcome of any election in Hancock County; and as a result of this unique position, the Mormons frequently, and sometimes unexpectedly, shifted their support from one party to the other in order to bargain for political favors."¹² In the presidential election in November 1840, Hancock County (mostly a Mormon constituency) voted for William Henry Harrison, the Whig candidate, with 752 votes. But to recognize both parties, two hundred Mormons voted as a



A February 1857 photograph of Abraham Lincoln taken prior to his nomination as a U.S. senator. (Brady National Photographic Art Gallery)

block, scratching off the last name on the Whig electoral ticket and substituting that of a Democrat, James H. Ralston. The name they marked off was that of Abraham Lincoln, who was then running for presidential elector but lost.¹³ This direct snub did not seem to influence Lincoln's later decisions regarding Mormons. According to historian Daniel Walker Howe, Lincoln was still one of the Illinois politicians most sympathetic to Mormons.¹⁴

In December of 1840, John C. Bennett, seeking a charter for their city, led a Mormon delegation representing fifteen thousand votes to the state legislature.¹⁵ They succeeded in obtaining an expansive charter that included provisions for a military legion, a city council, and a university. Bennett reported to the *LDS Times and Seasons*:

Many members in this house, likewise, were warmly in our favor, and with only one or two dissenting voices, every representative appeared inclined to extend to us all such powers as they considered us justly entitled to, and voted for the law: and here I should not forget to mention that Lincoln, whose name we erased from the electoral ticket in November, (not, however, on account of any dislike to him as a man, but simply because his was the last name on the ticket, and we desired to show our friendship to the Democratic party by substituting the name of Ralston for some one of the Whigs,) had the magnanimity to vote for our act, and came forward, after the final vote, to the bar of the house, and cordially congratulated me on its passage.¹⁶

Though Lincoln had voted affirmatively for the Nauvoo Charter, Church leaders apparently preferred Douglas to Lincoln. On New Year's Day in 1842, Joseph Smith himself expressed gratitude for Douglas in the *Times and Seasons*: "Douglass is a *Master Spirit*, and his friends are our friends—we are willing to cast our banners on the air, and fight by his side in the cause of humanity, and equal rights—the cause of liberty and the law."¹⁷

However, at one time Joseph Smith made a statement about Lincoln's future presidential opponent that could be viewed as either a curse or a warning. William Clayton, Joseph Smith's private secretary who was present at the time, reported a conversation that took place on May 18, 1843. Stephen Douglas was dining with Joseph Smith at Backenstos's in Carthage. After the meal, Douglas asked the Prophet to describe the Saints' experiences in Missouri. For three hours the Prophet gave a history of the persecution the Saints had endured. He also shared his experience with President Van Buren. Judge Douglas listened attentively and was empathetic. In conclusion, Joseph Smith then said, "Judge, you will aspire to the presidency of the United States; and if ever you turn your hand against me or the Latter-day Saints, you will feel the weight of the hand of Almighty upon you; and you will live to see and know that I have testified the truth to you; for the conversation of this day will stick to you through life."¹⁸

This prophecy was first published in Utah in the *Deseret News* of September 24, 1856, and then published in England in the *Millennial Star* in February 1859 in the "History of Joseph Smith" section. The publication of this prophecy added to the folk belief that would be with Latter-day Saints for generations

that Douglas and Smith had a close personal relationship.

JOSEPH SMITH AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Lincoln and Joseph Smith were in the Illinois State Capital at the same time from November 4 to 8, 1839, and from December 31, 1842, to January 6, 1843.¹⁹ Although there is no evidence that the two men had any personal contact, they were probably aware of each other's presence in the city and had the opportunity to meet in person if either desired to do so.



Joseph Smith Jr., founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While there has been much research on the topic, there is no direct evidence that Joseph Smith and Abraham Lincoln met face-to-face. (Del Parson, American Prophet, © 2001 IRI)

With the murder of Joseph Smith in June 1844 at Carthage, Illinois, "Douglas and his fellow Democrats demanded that the Prophet's murderers be brought to justice, while the Whigs [Lincoln's party] slipped into an increasingly anti-Mormon stance," summarized Bruce A. Van Orden. The next fall saw a "continued deterioration [of] relationships

between the Mormons and their Illinois neighbors." Governor Thomas Ford commissioned four politicians, including Douglas, to raise an armed volunteer force to "negotiate the removal of the Mormons from Illinois."²⁰ The commission convinced Brigham Young and other Church leaders to leave the state by the



Photograph of Abraham Lincoln taken at Pittsfield, Illinois, October 1, 1858, two weeks before the final Lincoln–Douglas debate in Lincoln's unsuccessful bid for the Senate. (Photo by Calvin Jackson, Library of Congress)

next spring.²¹ During the Mormons' early years in the West, "Douglas continued to serve as a contact" in Congress for the Church.²² Lincoln served his only term in Congress during the Mormon exodus (1847–49).

THE PRESIDENCY AND THE TERRITORY, 1848–60

During the 1840s, according to Douglas's biographer, Lincoln wanted to be seen as the leader who would "provide [the] governmental organization to the west."²³ Lincoln aides and memoirists John Hay and John G. Nicolay observed that, by 1852, "the control of legislation for the territories was for the moment completely in the hands of Douglas. He was

himself chairman of the Committee of the Senate; and his special personal friend and political lieutenant in his own State, William A. Richardson, of Illinois, was chairman of the Territorial Committee of the House.”²⁴

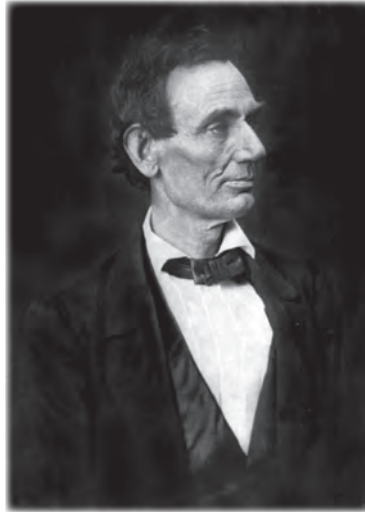
During the stormy political controversy over the Compromise of 1850, “Douglas and other Northern Democrats contended that slavery was subject to local law, and that the people of a Territory, like those of a State, could establish or prohibit it.”²⁵ “After months of wrangling and compromising,” writes Van Orden, “Congress barely succeeded in September 1850 in passing the several laws, including the Organic Act establishing Utah Territory, which made up the Compromise of 1850.”²⁶ “By these provisions, . . . California was admitted to the Union as a free state; the territories of Utah and New Mexico were organized . . . , later to be ‘received into the Union, with or without slavery, as their constitutions . . . [might] prescribe at the time of their admission.’”²⁷

While Douglas was engineering the Compromise of 1850, Lincoln had no national presence but had resumed his law practice in Illinois. Six years later, Lincoln became one of the founders of the Republican Party in Illinois. At their first national convention in February 1856 in Philadelphia, Republicans adopted a plank in their platform that it was “the duty of Congress to prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism, polygamy and slavery.”²⁸

Douglas, running a strong Democratic campaign, committed a strategic error in making the Mormons and Utah a campaign issue, according to Van Orden. Douglas had “engineered” the Kansas–Nebraska Act, maneuver-

ing it “through Congress to promote his ‘popular sovereignty’ doctrine,” in 1854.²⁹ The 1854 Kansas–Nebraska Act dogged Douglas in his presidential campaign of 1856, his senatorial contest against Lincoln in 1858, and his presidential campaign in 1860. Douglas’s opponents attacked his role in the Kansas–Nebraska Act as a way to “bring Utah in[to the Union] as a polygamous state.”³⁰ The Republican Party immediately hopped on the bandwagon, hoping to make political hay out of

Mormon polygamy. On June 12, 1857, with Lincoln present, the grand jury of Springfield’s district court “asked Douglas to express his views on three of the most important topics ‘now agitating the minds of the American people’—Kansas, the Dred Scott decision, and conditions in Utah Territory.”³¹ Douglas tried to position himself as a super-patriot by being extremely critical of the Mormons, accusing them of being “bound by horrid oaths and terrible penalties to recognize and maintain the authority of Brigham Young.” He also said the Mormons were attempting “to subvert the Government of the United States, and resist its authority.” Among his charges were the following: (1) nine-tenths of Utah’s citizens were aliens who refused to become naturalized, (2) Brigham Young was guilty of inciting the



This 1860 photograph of Abraham Lincoln was taken during his presidential campaign. (Library of Congress)

Indians to rob and murder American citizens, (3) the Mormons were a “loathsome, disgusting ulcer,” (4) Utah’s territorial government and the Organic Act should be repealed, and (5) Brigham Young should be brought back east to stand trial—in Missouri. The “Little Giant” closed his speech by inviting anyone with a better proposition to bring it forward.³² Lincoln, who was present in the audience, promised a rebuttal in two weeks.³³

Although Lincoln’s main thrust in his rebuttal was to contend that popular sovereignty was ineffective, he also refuted Douglas’s plans for Utah.³⁴ Without Douglas being present, he began his half-hour speech with this:

I am here to-night, partly by the invitation of some of you, and partly by my own inclination. Two weeks ago Judge Douglas spoke here on the several subjects of Kansas, the Dred Scott decision and Utah. I listened to the speech at the time, and have read the report of it since. It was intended to controvert opinions which I think just, and to assail (politically not personally,) those men who, in common with me, entertain those opinions. For this reason I wished then, and still wish, to make some answer to it, which I now take the opportunity of doing. I begin with Utah.³⁵

Civil War scholar E. B. Long tells us that Lincoln’s reference to the Mormons was “mainly in the context of his arguments with Senator Douglas over state sovereignty. He was critical of Douglas’s suggestion to divide up Utah, as that would not be in line with the senator’s view of popular sovereignty.”³⁶ Lincoln’s response included the following:

If it prove to be true, as is probable, that the people of Utah are in open rebellion to the United States, . . . I say too, if they are in rebellion, they ought to be somehow coerced to obedience. . . .³⁷

But in all this, it is very plain the Judge evades the only question the Republicans have ever pressed upon the Democracy in regard to Utah. That question the Judge well knew to be this: “If the people of Utah shall peacefully form a State Constitution tolerating polygamy, will the Democracy admit them into the Union?” There is nothing in the United States constitution or Law against polygamy; and why is it not a part of the Judge’s “sacred right of self-government” for the people to have it, or rather to keep it, if they choose?³⁸

Lincoln took this stance not because he supported polygamy but because Douglas opposed it, even in a territory where the people wanted it. Polygamy thus became evidence of the glaring inconsistency of popular sovereignty. Lincoln saw the Mormons as a political problem to be managed, and he used the issue to embarrass Douglas by pushing his thinking to a logical conclusion. That polygamy is not forbidden by the Constitution was an argumentative point, not a defense of it. For the most part, Mormons in Utah completely ignored Lincoln’s rebuttal but were vehement about Douglas’s speech. A *Deseret News* editorial provided a lengthy review of Douglas’s speech condemning polygamy, followed by the account of the interview between Joseph Smith and Douglas as recorded in the *Journal of William Clayton*.³⁹

In the *Virginia Law Review*, Attorney Kelly Elizabeth Phipps argues that, while the

reasons for criticizing polygamy have changed over time, Lincoln's tough question remains the same: "How do you draw the line between rescuing victims and oppressing communities?" Before the Civil War, Northern politicians, including Lincoln, portrayed polygamy as another Southern slave power waiting to rebel. In these politicians' view, polygamists were holding their wives hostage as slaves.

In the mid-nineteenth century, opposition to polygamy was always linked to slavery. Lincoln Republicans portrayed Mormon plural wives as innocent victims held in subjugation akin to enslaved blacks in the South. They wanted to purge the nation of licentious power, including such tyrants as "slave-masters and polygamous husbands."⁴⁰ As a Republican, Lincoln was committed to ending slavery in the territories and argued that the federal government, not popular sovereignty, should govern territories, including Utah. Utah became vital to his vision of expanded power for the federal government, and he continued to use Utah "to illustrate the flaw in Stephen A. Douglas' 'Popular Sovereignty' argument."⁴¹

Although Lincoln was willing to invoke polygamy to validate federal power to govern the territories, he was not committed to any particular plan for using federal power to eradicate the practice. This stance worked to the advantage of Mormons who were committed to continuing plural marriage. By 1860, with Lincoln as the leader of the Republican

Party, the platform dropped all references to polygamy; and in Lincoln's presidential race, antipolygamy was seen as a derivative of the antislavery movement.⁴²

In a speech given on April 10, 1860, at Bloomington, Illinois, six weeks before he would accept the Republican nomination, Lincoln reminded his listeners that only that week the U.S. House of Representatives had passed HR7, which was designed to punish the practice of polygamy. "While the Senate would ultimately let the bill languish and die in committee," the issue of polygamy was still on Lincoln's mind.⁴³ A newspaper account of his speech summarized, "Mr. Lincoln said he *supposed* that the friends of popular sovereignty would say—if they dared speak out—that *polygamy*

was wrong and slavery right; and therefore one might thus be put down and the other not."⁴⁴ Thus, prior to his presidency, Lincoln did not seem concerned with polygamy except as an illustration of political principles. Lincoln's attitude was instrumental in allowing the Saints to get a foothold in the West. If he had been adamant about eradicating polygamy during the 1860s, conditions would have been much different for the LDS Church.

Many Mormons believed that, because Douglas turned against the Mormons, he failed politically as Joseph Smith had prophesied and that despite Douglas's popularity, Lincoln had ascended to the presidency. Van Orden tells us that "according to Mormon



Abraham Lincoln in a reflective pose (May 16, 1861). (Library of Congress)



Major Allan Pinkerton, President Lincoln, and General John A. McClelland at Antietam, Maryland, in October 1862. (National Archives)

tradition, Douglas had every reason to believe that he would win the presidency, but would lose according to Joseph Smith's prophecy."⁴⁵

The people of Utah learned of Lincoln's election in the weekly *Deseret News* on November 14, 1860. On November 28, it editorialized:

There will be jolly times at the seat of Government during the session, and

the members of Congress will have enough business to attend to, in all probability, in which they will be more particularly interested and concerned than in the annihilation of the Saints; and may be expected to be otherwise engaged, than in providing for . . . the overthrow and destruction of those, who by the spirit of inspiration, have long been advised of the calamities

that were coming upon the nations, and upon the United States in particular, in consequence of the iniquities and abominations, of the people and their rejection of the gospel which has been proclaimed unto them.⁴⁶

This editorial is only one of many forecasts of doom that had been uttered since the days of Joseph Smith and would continue to be repeated in the years to come. Nor were Mormons the only religion to make dire predictions. Although Mormons were glad that Lincoln had triumphed over Douglas, they were still not in Lincoln's corner. On November 19, 1860, Brigham Young wrote territorial delegate William H. Hooper that Mormons "from outside the borders of Utah were very much chopfallen at Lincoln's election."⁴⁷ When Douglas died in June 1861, Brigham Young told his office intimates that Douglas "should be president in the lower world."⁴⁸ Two months later, however, Young remarked to the same group that "Stephen A. Douglas was a far better man than President Abel [*sic*] Lincoln for he [Young] knew his [Lincoln's] feelings were hostile to this people."⁴⁹

Previously, on December 20, 1860, Young had written to Hooper, By your letters and papers I perceive that the secession question was being violently agitated, but without much definite action. Latest accounts seem to indicate that the South will so far back down as to give "Old Abe" a trial as to what course he will pursue. . . . But while the waves of commotion are whelming nearly the whole country, Utah in her rock fortresses is biding

her time to step in and rescue the constitution and aid all lovers of freedom in sustaining such laws as will secure justice and rights to all irrespective of creed or party.⁵⁰

Although Young did not know it, South Carolina had seceded on the same day, December 20, and the South, of course, did not back down. On January 25, 1861, after receiving news by Pony Express, Young commented to his office intimates, "If Abraham Lincoln when inaugurated would coerce the South there would be a pretty fight and if he did not he would be no President at all. . . . [W]hen Anarchy and confusion reigned the Devil's poor prospered."⁵¹

Prior to Lincoln's presidency, the Mormons had petitioned Congress for statehood twice, in 1850 and 1856. Still hoping for statehood, Mormons were angered when Nevada Territory was created on March 2, 1861, just two days before Lincoln's inauguration, and was assigned some of the land that had previously belonged to Utah Territory.⁵²

Brigham Young's records provide a veritable litany of negativity about the government in general and Abraham Lincoln in particular. On March 15, Young criticized, "Abe Lincoln was no friend to Christ, particularly, he had never raised his voice in our favor when he was aware that we were being persecuted."⁵³ At the April conference in 1861, Young declared that Lincoln was a very weak executive: "Like a rope of sand, or like a rope made of water. He is as weak as water."⁵⁴ By July 9, 1861, Young confided to those in his office: "Old 'Abe' the President of the U. S. has it in his mind to pitch into us when he had got through with the South. . . . Pres. Young was of opinion the sympathy

of the people for the South was in case they should be whipped, and the northern party remain in power, he thought they wanted the war to go [so] that both parties might be used up." Two days later, on July 11, he suggested, "It would not do for the northern and southern party to fight too much at once." On July 24, Young accused the government as having "in them a spirit to destroy everything."⁵⁵

In the Bowery on July 28, Young declared:

President Lincoln called out soldiers for three months, and was going to wipe the blot of secession from the escutcheon of the American Republic. The three months are gone, and the labor is scarcely begun. Now they are beginning to enlist men for three years; soon they will want to enlist during the war; and then, I was going to say, they will want them to enlist during the duration of hell. Do they know what they are doing? No; but they have begun to empty the earth, to cleanse the land, and prepare the way for the return of the Latter-day Saints to the centre Stake of Zion.⁵⁶

With this attitude of suspicion, Young entered into a turbulent relationship with the nation's chief executive as a "nongovernor" and Church leader.

UTAH TERRITORY DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Though Utah is seldom seen as being part of the Civil War, Long argues that its role was "central to the American West during the Civil War, . . . though it receives scant mention in Civil War histories and only a little more in volumes on the American West. Utah

Territory would have been important because of its geographical position astride transportation and communications arteries even if it had not been an anomaly. And it was also unprecedented in this country, being both a civil and a religious entity of considerable size and influence."⁵⁷

During the war, many Americans found Utah's support for the Union inadequate. Although most Mormons were from the North and Midwest and therefore favored the North, Church leadership took a neutral position. On July 4, 1861, Apostle John Taylor announced, "We know no North, no South, no East, no West; we abide strictly and positively by the Constitution, and cannot, by the intrigues or sophism of either party, be cajoled into any other attitude."⁵⁸

Edward Tullidge, Brigham Young's contemporary biographer, believed that if the Southern states had done precisely what Utah did and placed themselves on the defensive ground of their rights and institutions and under the political leadership of Brigham Young, they might have triumphed. Tullidge stated:

With the exception of the slavery question and the policy of secession, the South stood upon the same ground that Utah had stood upon just previously. True, she had no intention to follow any example set by Utah, for old and powerful States, which had ranked first in the Union from the very foundation of the nation, would not have taken Utah as their example. Yet this very fact, coupled with the stupendous view of North and South engaged in deadly conflict, shows how fundamental was the cause which Utah

maintained, and how pregnant were the times with a common national issue. . . . Brigham Young stands not only justified, but his conduct claims extraordinary admiration, for he led his people safely through that controversy without secession.⁵⁹

On October 22, 1861, General James Arlington Bennett of New York, who had left the Mormon Church in 1844, asked Lincoln if one thousand to ten thousand Mormon volunteers could be accepted for military service.⁶⁰ No existing record shows whether Bennett had spontaneously floated this possibility or one of Brigham's agents had asked him to do it. Lincoln could have drafted Mormons into the Union cause, since they were citizens in a territory. For unknown reasons, Lincoln denied the request, thus preserving Mormon isolation. Except for Lot Smith's Company,⁶¹ Utah basically opted out of the Civil War—a fray that claimed more casualties than all other wars in American history from the Revolution to Vietnam combined.⁶²

After Lincoln nominee John Titus, chief justice of the Utah Territorial Court, was appointed May 6, 1863, his actions showed him to be in harmony with the policy for the Saints in Utah to “let them alone.” Titus allegedly observed that the only desire of the Utah populace, since being admitted as a territory, was such: “To be left alone.”⁶³ According to

Lincoln historian Calvin N. Smith, “While Lincoln would have been happy to ignore the Mormons during those turbulent years of his presidency, he was unable to do so. The Utah Territory, in general, and Salt Lake City, in particular, comprised vital links in the Union’s communication and transportation system with Nevada and California; Lincoln’s appointees felt they had to keep a keen eye on things.”⁶⁴ As historians Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton observed, “If the Union were to maintain the loyalty of California and other important western areas, it was essential that Utah remain firmly in the North’s control.”⁶⁵ Lincoln’s presidential involvement with the territory of Utah and the Mormons during the Civil War focused on four key issues: communication, transportation, polygamy, and federal appointees.

Communication and transportation. One act of Lincoln’s presidency that had a direct impact on Utah was shifting the stage lines north, away from Confederate troops with a new route passing directly through Salt Lake City. A key segment of the transcontinental telegraph also ran through Utah. According to Edward Tullidge, Utah pioneers were among the “first projectors and first proposers to the American nation of a trans-continental railroad” and telegraph.⁶⁶ The Enabling Act, which provided “aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from The Missouri river to the Pacific ocean, and to secure to the government



Abraham Lincoln visiting the battlefield at Antietam, Maryland, on October 3, 1862. (Photo by Alexander Gardner, Library of Congress)

the use of the same for postal, military, and other purposes” was signed by Lincoln on July 1, 1862.⁶⁷ The telegraph was a tremendous improvement in communication speed over the short-lived Pony Express.⁶⁸ The telegraph also provided communicational support for the North. Brigham Young sent his first telegram on October 18, 1861, to J. H. Wade, president of the Pacific Telegraph Company, in Cleveland, Ohio. It does not reflect his earlier negative comments about Lincoln but instead affirms, “Utah has not seceded, but is firm for the Constitution and laws of our once happy country.” President Lincoln sent a return message two days later, on October 20: “The completion of the Telegraph to Great Salt Lake City, is auspicious of the stability and union of the Republic. The Government reciprocates your congratulations.”⁶⁹

To deal with concerns that Indians might attempt to destroy or disable the telegraph, Young wired Washington, DC, on April 14, 1862, asserting that “the militia of Utah are ready and able . . . to take care of all the Indians within [Utah’s] borders.”⁷⁰ On April 26, 1862, Milton S. Latham, a U.S. representative from California, sent a wire to Lincoln about the “depredations which Indians were committing on the line of the Overland Mail and Telegraph near Independence Rock” and suggested that a troop of one hundred Mormons be raised and equipped to protect the telegraph.⁷¹ Acting on this advice, Lincoln bypassed federal appointees and authorized

Young to raise, arm, and equip one company of cavalry for ninety days of service.



An 1862 portrait of Brigham Young, whose views of Abraham Lincoln were often less than favorable. (Charles R. Savage Photograph Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University)

Despite the quick Mormon response, Colonel Patrick Edward Connor and a force of seven hundred California volunteers were ordered into Salt Lake City, arriving on October 22, 1862. Connor eventually built a camp on the eastern bench overlooking the city and named it Camp Douglas, to honor Stephen A. Douglas, who had turned against the Mormon people.⁷² Historically, this situation is baffling and remains without satisfactory explanation.⁷³

The Union Pacific broke ground in Omaha on December 2, 1863. On that day, Young sent Lincoln a telegram that read, “Let the hands of the honest be united to aid the great national improvement.”⁷⁴ Young lost no time in showing his own support and, on July 1, 1862, “subscribed for \$5,000 worth of stock in the newly organized Union Pacific Railroad Company, and became a director in 1865.”⁷⁵ From that day on, Young contracted with both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads to furnish supplies and “grade all of the transcontinental line in Utah, thus bringing cash revenue to Mormons and inhibiting the influx of non-Mormon laborers.”⁷⁶ Union Pacific historian L. O. Leonard asserts that “no statesman that ever lived had a keener interest in the Union Pacific than Abraham Lincoln.”⁷⁷ However, most of the construction in or near Utah occurred after Lincoln’s assassination. The railroad itself was completed with a ceremonial uniting of both



Located on a picturesque hilltop in Washington, D.C., President Lincoln's cottage is the most significant historic site directly associated with Lincoln's presidency aside from the White House. During the Civil War, President Lincoln and his family resided here from June to November of 1862, 1863, and 1864. (Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

railway lines on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Point, Utah.

Polygamy. On November 18, 1861, the Executive Mansion borrowed the following books from the Library of Congress: *The Works of Victor Hugo*, John Gunnison's *The Mormons or Latter Day Saints*, John Hyde's *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs*, and the Book of Mormon. Four days later, the White House requested, among other items, *Mormonism in All Ages* by Julian M. Sturtevant and *Memoirs of the Life and Death of Joseph Smith* by Henry Maheur. Lincoln kept the Book of Mormon for eight months before returning it.⁷⁸ His reasons (or those of his staff) for requesting these items are not explained in the documentary record; however, the president was considering the appointment of a new territorial governor for Utah and Utah's most recent petition for statehood.⁷⁹

On July 2, 1862, Lincoln signed into law the Morrill Anti-Polygamy Act, aimed

specifically at punishing Utah's polygamy by declaring bigamy a crime in U.S. territories. However, it seems unlikely that anyone, including Lincoln, thought the bill would end polygamy.⁸⁰

If Lincoln as an attorney carefully read the bill, he may have recognized its flaws. First, the law gave prosecutors an insurmountable burden in proving marriages. Mormon plural marriages were performed in secret, and Church officiators were not likely to turn evidence over to prosecutors. Second, Phipps and Steven E. Cresswell, professor of history at West Virginia Wesleyan College, suggest jury nullification could block prosecutions. Lincoln appointed federal district court judges, but the all-Mormon territorial legislature appointed probate judges, some of whom were Mormon bishops or other Church leaders. During the 1850s, the Utah legislature required federal district courts to select jurors from lists prepared by the

probate judges; therefore, most juries were comprised of Mormons who would nullify any polygamy prosecutions.⁸¹

Thus Phipps sees the Morrill Act as primarily “a symbolic assertion of federal power, not a realistic piece of anti-polygamy legislation.” It meant that “the Republican Party entered the post-war era with a catchy phrase about polygamy and a useless law on the books.”⁸² Looking back, we can see that Lincoln and his administration took no steps whatsoever to enforce this law in Utah.

It is interesting to speculate on Lincoln's motives for signing this bill, whether he would have enforced it had he lived into his second term and whether, had he vetoed it, the progressively harsher legislation such as the Edmunds-Tucker Act (1887) would have passed under his successors. We hypothesize that Lincoln signed the Morrill Act to fulfill the antipolygamy plank in his presidential platform, but not because he had serious concerns about polygamy. When Brigham Young sent one of his sons (unnamed in the article) to Washington as a member of a delegation to lobby for the “political and polygmatic interests of Utah,” Lincoln dismissed polygamy with a joke: “It was absurd to talk about polygamy, as ‘he never yet heard of a man having a wife who wanted two.’”⁸³ Utahns likewise ignored the Morrill Act. Two days after its passage, the territory celebrated 1862's Independence Day in grand style, with Salt Lake's mayor proposing toasts to Lincoln's health and the Union's success.⁸⁴ The Saints also celebrated Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and several Union victories.⁸⁵ Mormon support for Lincoln increased during his first term despite his signing the Morrill Act.⁸⁶ The Mormons ignored the law; and for a decade and a half, they declared that it was unconstitutional.⁸⁷

Federal appointees. On April 1, 1861, William H. Hooper, Utah's delegate to Congress, presented to the Senate a list of Utahns for territorial government offices, including Brigham Young for governor.⁸⁸ On April 11, Young wrote to Hooper:

It was quite proper and correct to suggest to Mr. Lincoln that our appointments belong to us, by every just construction of the spirit of the Constitution. But should he be unwilling or unable to make our appointments from names you may present . . . it will doubtless still be the best policy to patiently bide our time, for plausible pretext against us would tend more than aught else to heal the present breach and unite them in a crusade to Utah, like the Irishman and his wife, who both pitched into the man who parted them when fighting.⁸⁹

Brigham Young was not appointed governor. During the Civil War, a strange dichotomy continued in Utah that greatly affected the territory's relationship with the executive branch of the federal government: there was an amazingly effective leadership, on one hand, with Brigham Young and his theocracy and an equal but frustrating lack of leadership, on the other hand, with U.S. federal appointees.

On October 3, 1861, Lincoln made his first appointments for Utah Territory: “John W. Dawson as governor, John F. Kinney as chief justice, R. P. Flenniken and J. R. Crosby [as] associate judges, Frank Fuller [as] secretary, and James Duane Doty [as] superintendent of Indian Affairs.”⁹⁰ The Dawson appointment was not popular. According to Norman Furniss, historian of the Utah War,

Mormons knew Dawson as “a man of loose morals whom the Republican chieftains of Fort Wayne had nominated in order to rid themselves of an objectionable person.”⁹¹ He did not arrive in Utah until December 7, 1861. Ten days later, the territorial legislature passed a bill calling for a convention of delegates to create a constitution and organize a state government. Territorial secretary Frank Fuller, acting governor at the time, was in support of the bill. However, when Dawson arrived, he vetoed it. This action did not win him any support with the Mormons.⁹² Dawson also made improper advances toward his Mormon housekeeper,⁹³ which resulted in such hostility that he “took his enforced flight on December 31, 1861.”⁹⁴ Ironically, when Dawson arrived in Washington, DC, he found that the Senate had refused to confirm his appointment and he would have had to leave Utah anyway.⁹⁵ Flenniken and Crosby left the territory a month later, with news of their departure being telegraphed to Lincoln.⁹⁶ Fuller replaced Dawson until Lincoln could appoint another governor.⁹⁷

Lincoln’s next choice, Stephen S. Harding, along with Justices Charles B. Waite and Thomas J. Drake, did not fare much better in Utah than their predecessors. Harding had had “some previous positive associations with the Mormons” and therefore was expected to be a popular choice.⁹⁸ Harding had visited Palmyra, New York, and had met Joseph Smith during the summer of 1829, an encounter that he wrote about in 1890.⁹⁹ Harding told

Utahns, after he was appointed in March 1862, that he was “a messenger of peace and good will” with “no religious prejudices to overcome.”¹⁰⁰ However, when Mormon leaders explained their view that the Morrill Act was unconstitutional and their desire for a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, Harding attacked this perspective as “dangerous and disloyal.”¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, Harding, Drake, and Waite were writing letters to Washington discrediting the Mormons and asking Lincoln to put

down Indian uprisings by using “paroled [federal]” troops.¹⁰² These letters claimed that the people of Utah were trying to “stir up strife between the people of the Territory of Utah and the troops . . . in Douglas.”¹⁰³ In the spring of 1863, mass meetings were held in Salt Lake City, the outcome of which was a petition asking Lincoln to remove the three from office.¹⁰⁴ It referred to Harding as “an unsafe bridge over a dangerous stream—jeopardizing the lives of all who pass over it—or as . . . a pestiferous cesspool in our district breeding disease and death.”¹⁰⁵

As soon as the action of the Mormon mass-meeting became known at Camp Douglas, all the commissioned officers signed a counter-petition to President Lincoln, which stated that, “as an act of duty we owe our government,” they felt compelled to state that the Mormon petition “was a base and unqualified falsehood . . . and that there was no good reason for [the three officers’] removal.”¹⁰⁶ Waite and Drake also assured Lincoln a force



This February 9, 1864, photograph of Abraham Lincoln is used for the image that appears on the American five-dollar bill. (Library of Congress)



Abraham Lincoln delivering his second inaugural address as president of the United States in Washington, DC. This photo shows President Lincoln standing in the center (below the flag and to the left), on the east front of the U.S. Capitol. (Library of Congress)

of five thousand troops would be required to allow federal courts in Utah to function effectively.¹⁰⁷ Judge Waite resigned in 1864 after a complete court term in which he suffered the mortification of not having a single case on the docket. Judge Drake remained but simply went through a futile form of holding court.¹⁰⁸

Interestingly, instead of siding with Harding's support of the Morrill law or the petition sent by the federal officers, Lincoln acted on the Mormon petition. On June 11, 1863, he replaced Harding with James Duane Doty, a man "of high capabilities" who had served as superintendent of Indian Affairs.¹⁰⁹ According to historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, Lincoln himself made the appointment and "endeavored to restore peace by making concessions

on both sides." As governor, Doty arose "above petty smallness" and "made many friends and scarcely a single enemy," earning the respect of Utahns. This appointment must have increased Lincoln's popularity among the Mormons. After Lincoln's reelection in 1864, the citizens of Salt Lake celebrated with a mile-long parade, patriotic speeches, and toasts to the president's health. Then, in mourning for his assassination, on April 19, 1865, businesses closed and flags were hung at half-mast.¹¹⁰ The theater postponed its Saturday performance, buildings were draped in crepe, and in a special memorial service, Apostles Wilford W. Woodruff, Franklin D. Richards, and George Q. Cannon eulogized the fallen president.¹¹¹

CONCLUSION

Lincoln had ties to the Mormons when they came to Illinois and continued to interact with them until he died after being shot in Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865. In Illinois, Mormons were the clients, friends, and neighbors of his associates. It may never be known if his relationships with individual Mormons affected Lincoln personally or changed him or his views over time. If the Church headquarters had remained in Illinois, Lincoln's political career, attitudes, and subsequent presidential decisions might have taken a different turn; but this hypothesis requires the double speculation that the Mormons themselves would have altered their behavior and approach to local politics in such a way that staying remained a possibility.

There is little evidence that the Mormons were ever more than a political object for Lincoln. We are aware of no documentation that Mormons, as individuals or as a group, affected his personal life. It seems likely that the explosive reaction to his "Rebecca" articles made him cautious about constructing public statements. Hence, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speculate on his personal reaction to the Church's activities.

Mormons had a more direct relationship with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln's chief opponent. Clearly documented, however, is Douglas's later outspoken opposition to Mormonism while, in contrast, Lincoln as president maintained a "hands-off" stance—not enforcing the Morrill Act or imposing the draft—that gave the Church the time to establish strong communities in the Mountain West. This policy may owe less to Lincoln's views on Mormonism, however, than the constant attention demanded by the Civil War.



Abraham Lincoln with his son Tad (Thomas) at the White House in 1865. (Library of Congress)

Lincoln did not grant Utah's petition for statehood, but numerous reasons seem more likely than dislike for Mormons. He did succeed in establishing a cooperative and respectful relationship between Utah and the federal government, an achievement predecessor James Buchanan had signally failed to do. Although there is no documentation on this point, Lincoln as an attorney may have been aware that statehood might make it difficult to repress polygamy, an action to which his party was politically committed.

For their part, Utahns during Lincoln's presidency, except for some markedly acerbic private comments by Brigham Young early on, were appreciative and respectful. They recognized him as the nation's chief executive, affiliated with the Union which he represented during the civil strife, and were grateful that he had defeated Douglas. Over the course of his presidency, their affection and admiration grew steadily. They celebrated his second inauguration and mourned his assassination.

Lincoln's attitudes may have been formed by his dealings with Latter-day Saints on a personal level, but he was generally tolerant of all human beings. Holland observes:

All through his life Lincoln saw people as the same. He saw that human nature was relatively consistent wherever you were. If you saw significant differences in behavior, you should chalk things up primarily to the environment people were in and thus be quite generous in your assessments of others. All through his life he effectively said to the North: "Don't get on your moral high horse. If you lived in the South, you would probably be proslavery too."

There are such strong incentives financially; there is such a strong culture and tradition of it; be a little bit careful about being morally self-righteous."¹¹²

In like manner, Lincoln may have felt that the culture and environment of Mormons rather than some moral degeneration in their character influenced them to live polygamy. Lincoln's ability and predisposition to accept people not as "others" but as the "same" was extremely advantageous to the Mormon community. Lincoln seems to have accepted Mormons as part of the American whole, and his toleration had a distinctly positive influence on Mormon society during the Civil War period.

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NOTES

Parts of this chapter were previously published in the *Journal of Mormon History* and are used by permission.

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2. T. B. H. Stenhouse to Brigham Young, June 7, 1863, Brigham Young Correspondence, Church Archives, as cited in Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 170; also found in Gustive O. Larson, *The "Americanization" of Utah for Statehood* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1971), 60n61. Also see Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1936), 369. Nibley told the writer that his account was based on Orson F. Whitney, *Popular History of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 180, 2:24–25, and verbal statements from Whitney. Young to G. Q. Cannon, Great Salt Lake City, June 25, 1863, credits the statement "I will leave them

alone, if they will let me alone" to Lincoln's conversation with Stenhouse on the 6th inst. *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (chronological scrapbook of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), June 25, 1863, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. An AP dispatch from Washington, June 7, mentions the presence in the capital of "a prominent Mormon." *New York Times*, June 8, 1863, 5. In a sermon on June 4, 1864, Young told the plowing anecdote but identified it as "what was told the President . . . said to a gentleman who is a preacher and a member of Congress." *Deseret News*, June 22, 1864, 303. At an anti-Cullom bill meeting in Salt Lake in 1870, Stenhouse, who had left the Church, stated that he had heard Lincoln make the "let them alone" pledge. *Tullidge's Quarterly Magazine*, October 1880, 60. For

- Brigham Young's version of Lincoln's statement in a letter to George Q. Cannon, see B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 5:70. Yet another version appears in Whitney, *Popular History of Utah*, 180.
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 4. Hubbard, "Abraham Lincoln as Seen by the Mormons," 91.
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 12. Hubbard, "Abraham Lincoln as Seen by the Mormons," 93.
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 16. JOAB, General in Israel (John C. Bennett), *Times and Seasons*, January 1, 1841, 267; emphasis in original.
 17. Joseph Smith, "State Gubernatorial Convention," *Times and Seasons*, January 1, 1842, 651; emphasis in original.
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 23. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 268.
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42. Phipps, "Marriage and Redemption," 447.
43. McGinnis and Smith, *Abraham Lincoln and the Western Territories*, 100.
44. Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 4:42; emphasis in original.
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49. Brigham Young, office journal, August 5, 1861, as cited in Long, *Saints and the Union*, 9. The identification of "he" in this quotation from Brigham Young's office journal is open to interpretation. Many scholars have interpreted "he" to refer to either Douglas or Lincoln. If "he" had referred to Young, you would usually expect it to read "I" (Young the writer) instead of "he." If Young's Journal was written by someone other than Young, it could be that a scribe wrote in third person rather than first person. The interpretation of this sentence is open to question. Long states, "It is not quite clear whether Young meant Douglas or Lincoln was hostile."
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55. Brigham Young, office journal, March 15, July 9, and July 24, 1861, Church History Library, as cited in E. B. Long, *Saints and the Union*, 36.
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79. Robert Bray, "What Abraham Lincoln Read: An Evaluative and Annotated List," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 39n24: "It is probable . . . that the half dozen volumes dealing with Mormonism, called for in August and November, 1861, and retained for periods varying from two to eight months, were sought by Lincoln as throwing desired light on one of the minor problems of his administration.' But while Lincoln may have needed to know about the Mormons in Utah, it does not follow that he would have been interested in the *Book of Mormon*, though he would have known of it from his earliest Illinois years" (emphasis in original).
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