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Social Welfare at the End of the World: How the Mormons Created an Alternative to the New Deal and Helped Build Modern Conservatism

Abstract: It is common for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be considered one of the most conservative religious groups in the United States. What is less well understood is as to when the relationship between Mormonism and American conservatism began. While some historians point to the social upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s as the glue that united Mormons and conservatives, the connection began decades earlier during the Great Depression. Leaders of the Mormon Church interpreted Roosevelt's New Deal as the fulfillment of eschatological prophecy. Envisioning themselves saving America and the Constitution at the world's end, Mormon authorities established their own welfare program to inspire Latter-day Saints and Americans in general to eschew the New Deal. Anti-New Dealers used the Mormon welfare plan to construct a conservative ideology. Accordingly, Mormons are essential elements in the formation of a political movement that revolutionized the United States.

Keywords: Mormonism, conservatism, New Deal, Great Depression, Church Security Program, Mormon Welfare

In 1976, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a stunning new report on their organization's welfare program. It detailed needs met and services rendered. But that was not all. The report also touched on biblical prophecy and its relationship to church social services. The authors of the report, entitled "Prophecy Regarding the Second Coming and its Implications for Welfare Services," peppered their analysis with allusions

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to a coming apocalypse and made some striking deductions. Looking at scriptural prophecy and statements by current and past leaders of the church, they concluded that increased crime, war, famine, disease, and a seemingly growing disregard for the United States Constitution, “speaks of the Lord’s imminent return.” In this unstable environment, they declared that the Church welfare program must “influence government officials” to “save the Constitution” from liberal legislation and trends that threatened the nation’s founding document.¹

Although scholars have not ignored the relationship between LDS theology, politics, and welfare policy, a deeper, historical analysis of the welfare arm of the LDS Church supporting conservative political causes in the face of imminent disaster deserves consideration.² From its founding at the height of the Great Depression, Mormon welfare has served an important role in tying Mormonism to American political conservatism. In fact, LDS social policy provided one of the first opportunities for economic and religious conservatives to make their peace with the Mormon faith as they sought to build and expand their influence within the Republican Party.

As of 2016, Mormons ranked as the most reliably Republican religious group in the United States, with around 70 percent of its American membership supporting the conservative GOP.³ Even if contemporary Mormons do take more liberal positions on issues like immigration, Latter-day Saints overwhelmingly fall in line with the conservative agenda. Despite such prominence, scholars have mostly excluded the Mormon Church and its base in the American West from analyses of the rise of twentieth-century political conservatism.⁴ Among those scholars who study LDS politics, there is little agreement on when and why Mormons began to identify with conservatism. Most historians argue that Mormons aligned themselves with the conservative wing of the GOP and the Religious Right in the 1970s or 1980s in response to feminism, gay rights, and abortion.⁵ Other scholars of religion point to a “new coalition” of conservative evangelicals and Mormons arising out of a 2008 joint effort to ban gay marriage in California.⁶ Either way, historians contend that the Mormon “conservative turn” arose after World War II.⁷ Yet, this article demonstrates that the Mormon/conservative alliance came much earlier. It was born during the Great Depression of the 1930s, a period in which scholars have begun finding the origins of the modern American conservative movement itself.⁸

This earlier shift toward conservatism can be more fruitfully explored and explained by looking at Mormon apocalyptic theology, which, despite

some historians' claims, remains a fundamental organizing principle in Mormonism since its founding.⁹ Mormons believed the expansion of federal power and experimentation under the "New Deal order" signaled the imminent destruction of the Constitution.¹⁰ Mormon founder Joseph Smith envisioned his followers saving the US Constitution and the ideals enshrined within it from destruction during the chaotic period before Christ's return to earth. Powerful Mormon leaders scrutinized the New Deal in light of Smith's predictions and concluded that it signaled the moment for Latter-day Saints to save the document (even though lay Mormons supported Franklin D. Roosevelt and voted for New Deal Democrats into the 1960s).¹¹ Accordingly, apocalyptic prophecies did not detract conservative Mormons from engaging in government, but like evangelicals, spurred activism and ultimately pushed them toward conservative politics.¹²

Throughout this article, I argue that conservative Latter-day Saint leaders firmly believed that their eschatological destiny was to save the Constitution from unchecked government power. They therefore stridently fought New Deal programs and spending within their community, which, according to FDR's increasing vote share in the state, only grew more popular among the laity.¹³ They expressed their opposition to Roosevelt's programs by launching an alternative welfare system, which Mormon leaders subsequently advertised to the nation as the better, more American, more constitutional way out of the Depression. By helping Mormons find work, food, and shelter through church resources, conservative leaders hoped to alleviate suffering but also limit the reach of the federal government into Latter-day Saint communities. Anti-New Dealers across the nation readily latched onto the Mormon welfare plan, using it as a physical manifestation around which to construct their ideology of limited federal authority, spending, and local control while simultaneously bringing Latter-day Saints into an alliance with conservative groups historically hostile to the religion. Even if this admiration did not result in replication, shared anxieties surrounding the developing welfare state helped Mormons form the conceptual contours of modern American conservatism as it developed in opposition to New Deal liberalism.¹⁴ In the long term, Mormons helped lay the foundations for post-World War II religious conservatism and the creation of an ideology that shaped US politics. Latter-day Saints are therefore essential to historical understandings of this dramatic transformation of American politics in the twentieth century.¹⁵

To make these arguments, I first focus on how many Mormon leaders responded negatively to the New Deal and how their eschatological prophecy surrounding the Constitution shaped their opposition to it. I then turn to the

formation of the church welfare program. Along with helping the poor, Mormon authorities intended their welfare plan to draw Latter-day Saints away from the New Deal and make them soldiers in the battle over the Constitution. The final section of this article focuses on how Mormon leaders heralded their program as the best response to the Depression and how anti-New Dealers across the United States used it in constructing a conservative response to the New Deal.

THE NEW DEAL

Early Mormons, under Joseph Smith's leadership, firmly believed in the imminent return of Jesus Christ and the attending destruction of the world.¹⁶ While other nineteenth-century prophets foresaw the world's end, Smith connected his apocalyptic visions to the American Constitution. In an 1833 revelation (later canonized as *Doctrine and Covenants*, section 101), Smith revealed the divine origins of the Constitution and commanded that it "should be maintained for the rights and protections of all flesh." God promised to "vex the nation" and destroy those who failed to do so.¹⁷ He later predicted in 1840 that amid of wars and chaos as Christ's return drew nearer "this Nation will be on the very verge of crumbling and when the constitution is upon the brink of ruin this people . . . shall bear the constitution away from the very verge of destruction."¹⁸ Smith saw the Constitution as a divinely inspired document and he expected his followers to use it in establishing the Kingdom of God as divine wrath covered the earth at Christ's reappearance.¹⁹ Smith never proffered a specific outline of events around which his prediction would unfold, but Mormon leaders throughout the nineteenth century frequently envisioned themselves participating in his prophecy. Living in the last days—as their identity as "Latter-day Saints" reveals—Mormons expected the United States to descend into anarchy at any time and the Constitution to end up "hanging as by a thread."²⁰ Exact chronology was not as important to them as always being ready to prepare their souls and their bodies for action in order to save the founding document in the last days.

Inheriting this apocalyptic legacy, twentieth-century Latter-day Saints continued to envision themselves living on the brink of the Second Coming. "It does seem to me," Apostle George Albert Smith explained in a 1932 sermon, "if men are thinking seriously, if they are reading the scriptures, they must know that the happenings that the Lord said would occur in the last days are occurring."²¹ In this context, Smith's prophecies surrounding the

Constitution profoundly shaped how Mormon leaders responded to Roosevelt's New Deal. At first, church leaders approached the New Deal optimistically, believing it had the potential to alleviate poverty in Mormon communities. Yet, many grew increasingly hostile as Roosevelt expanded the federal government's influence and spending.²² While Mormon leaders' business holdings and historical suspicion of the federal government informed their opposition to the New Deal, Smith's eschatological prophecies played a formative role in their hostility to FDR's program. Even though church leaders did not make direct associations between the New Deal and Christ's imminent return, Mormons continued to believe that they needed to rescue the Constitution before that grand day arrived. Moreover, to allow the document to fail would have apocalyptic repercussions across the globe.

Although some more liberal authorities such as Sylvester Cannon and Amy Brown Lyman supported the New Deal, the most powerful leaders, including Reed Smoot, church president Heber J. Grant, his counselors David O. McKay and most prominently J. Reuben Clark, believed that the Depression unleashed unconstitutional "political tenets and doctrines," and they collectively became convinced by the eve of World War II of the dangers of the "economic policies of what is termed the New Deal," believing that "the nation cannot be preserved if the present government policies shall continue." Consequently, these leaders looked to their "special relationship to the Constitution and its preservation" bequeathed by Smith's warnings and predictions.²³ Roosevelt's stances threatened the Constitution just as prophecy predicted. Adopting similar rhetoric to that of other conservatives, the New Deal, they insisted, promised to extinguish the God-given Constitution. Hearing Joseph Smith's prophecies reverberate into the present, conservative Mormon authorities dedicated themselves to fulfilling their prophetic commission to rescue it from dissolution.

Even before FDR became president in 1933, Mormon leaders grew suspicious of this charismatic politician from Hyde Park. Roosevelt empowered a growing anti-Prohibition movement in his 1932 campaign, promising to repeal it if elected.²⁴ They viewed this as open defiance of the Constitution, even if Prohibition was a late amendment. Right up to the election, church leaders publicly supported the Eighteenth Amendment as fundamental to the "Constitution of the Nation" and if allowed to fail would pave the way for the destruction of the document.²⁵ Moreover, they found in the battle over Prohibition fulfillment of apocalyptic forecasts. Looking to Smith's foresight, Melvin J. Ballard, a powerful member of the LDS church's governing Twelve Apostles, argued that "there is one part of the Constitution hanging as

by a thread today,” the Eighteenth Amendment. Reminding his audience of their God-given “place . . . to rally to support the Constitution,” he called on Mormons to “maintain it and defend it and support it by their lives and by their vote.”²⁶ The leadership’s repugnance at repealing Prohibition represented more than a distaste for booze. Rather, it betrayed a growing disrespect of the Constitution and signaled the fulfillment of Smith’s predictions in the twentieth century.²⁷

It is plausible to explain theology as a veneer for economic or political ideology. However, categories of politics, economics, and religion are not so easily distinguished. They often blend together and reinforce one another in powerful ways. To dismiss Mormon beliefs in prophecy as simply a cover for other interests misses the powerful ways that religion inspires people to act. The reality and power of the Mormon religious worldview cannot be ignored or dismissed as it continually shaped how Latter-day Saints defined their place in the United States.

As Roosevelt entered office intent on alleviating the Great Depression through robust federal intervention, church leaders initially encouraged Mormons to seek aid from government programs. They recognized that the church simply did not have the resources at the time to provide relief and encouraged members to claim a share of the substantial federal funds pouring into the West.²⁸ Yet, Mormon leaders frequently counseled members to accept government money only as a last resort.²⁹ By 1935, this limited toleration had transformed into hostility as church leaders urged Mormons to abandon federal relief and warned that experimental responses to the Depression threatened the sacred Constitution.³⁰ Indeed, Clark strongly encouraged Mormons in April to participate in the war over the document’s fate by finding a “burning desire to uphold the Constitution” rather than “thrust aside the great fundamentals of our national life for something yet untried.” If they failed to realize their purpose, Clark warned, God’s Kingdom could not be built on earth.³¹ Even if conservative authorities exercised caution in their public statements, no one doubted that Mormon leaders were “against the New Deal,” as a journalist argued at the time.³²

Conservative church leaders additionally looked to Smith’s prophecies to block Roosevelt’s 1936 reelection and the advance of the New Deal. On October 31, several days before the election, the church-owned *Deseret News* published an editorial calling on Latter-day Saints to vote for Republican candidate Alf Landon. Expressing the beliefs of conservative church leaders, the editorial reiterated the divine providence of the Constitution and drew from *Doctrine and Covenants* 101 to stress the Mormons’ “peculiar relationship . . . towards

the Constitution and its preservation.” It claimed that they could fulfill their prophetic commission by voting for Landon, who would uphold the Constitution, unlike FDR, who brazenly eschewed it. “Church members who believe the revelations and the words of the prophet,” the editorial continued, “must stand for the Constitution” by refusing Roosevelt another term.³³ Smith’s words regarding an end-times constitutional crisis were being realized and Latter-day Saints had to fulfill their eschatological and patriotic responsibility in protecting it from Roosevelt.

Roosevelt won the election by a landslide, winning 69 percent of the vote in Utah, a thirteen-point increase from 1932.³⁴ Mormons in western states increased their support and followed the nation in voting for Roosevelt, seeing him, in contrast to their leaders, as the nation’s best hope. But Mormon leaders refused to yield. Notwithstanding their failure in preventing FDR’s reelection, they redoubled their efforts, preaching resistance to innovations in governmental powers and programs, reminding Mormons of their destiny to save the Constitution.³⁵ One local Arizona Mormon authority could in 1939 reasonably say that FDR’s policies were “foreign to the teachings of the Church.”³⁶ Clark summarized in 1941 the issues that made them so. He warned that the growing power of the Executive Branch, erosion of self-governance, and growing federal authority over the Depression threatened the “complete destruction of the Constitution and the government established under it.” This event, he warned, would ultimately lead to the obliteration of God-given “free agency” as dictatorship consumed the globe. But returning to Smith’s foresight, Clark yet again called on Mormons to step into their ordained role to do everything in their “power to save it from pollution or destruction.”³⁷

Thoroughly persuaded that the New Deal could destroy the nation and guided by prophetic mandates, Grant, McKay, and Clark pledged to an outsider in 1941 “to do all that is humanly possible to preserve our free institutions and this Constitution and the Government as it was set up under it.”³⁸ Other Americans feared for constitutional government during the Depression. Popular Republican Senator and New Deal opponent Arthur Vandenberg wondered if the “American form of government is to be preserved” under FDR, and one fundamentalist Christian accused the president of seeking to “scrap the Constitution” in preparation for the reign of the Antichrist.³⁹ Though sharing similar anxieties, the sources of Mormon leaders’ fear were unique. They derived from their founding prophet’s predictions. But they also knew that end-times prophecy guaranteed that they would salvage the sacred Constitution. At once frightened and empowered, Mormon leaders never lost sight of their responsibility to save the nation and developed novel solutions in response.

WELFARE

Latter-day Saints suffered a great deal during the Great Depression, with unemployment reaching as high as 35 percent in Utah.⁴⁰ Amid such misery, Roosevelt appeared as a beacon of light and savior to the nation.⁴¹ Thousands of Mormons embraced FDR, supporting his presidential bids and working in New Deal programs.⁴² Prominent Latter-day Saints such as Marriner Eccles and Frank Moss worked closely with Roosevelt to craft New Deal policies or labored atop New Deal agencies.⁴³ Not all Mormons supported Roosevelt's policies, but thousands happily accepted with countless other Americans the security offered by the New Deal.⁴⁴ While church leaders hoped to incite Latter-day Saints against Roosevelt, everyday Mormons rejected them as they applied their own interpretations of the political and economic environment. Additionally, Grant was an unpopular leader, and not until later in the century did the sitting church president become celebrated as prophet on a par with Joseph Smith.⁴⁵ Whereas LDS authorities did their utmost to rally members in the battle to uphold the Constitution in the last days, their flock mostly disregarded these pleas. Many if not most individual Mormons saw Roosevelt's New Deal as a deliverer from humiliating poverty.

That numerous rank-and-file Mormons supported the New Deal distressed the Mormon leadership and enhanced their urgency. Church leaders recognized that rhetorical attacks against the New Deal failed to prevent the laity from participating in federal welfare and they adjusted their tactics. In October 1935, church bureaucrats conducted a survey to find just how many members took relief funds. Out of more than 700,000 Mormons, they found that 88,460 of their American membership received welfare in some form with the clear majority (80,247) accepting funds from the federal government. Mormon authorities responded to this discovery by launching the Church Security Plan, later renamed the Church Welfare Plan, in 1936. Even though Mormon leaders had been thinking about a churchwide welfare program from the beginning of the Depression, persisting distress of the Mormon flock and their support of the New Deal encouraged a more systematic effort.⁴⁶

In crafting their scheme, Mormon leaders drew from their cooperative legacy. Nineteenth-century Mormon communalism provided the bedrock for LDS leaders to build their welfare system. The program also ironically drew inspiration from New Deal public works and even encouraged Mormons to stay active in New Deal programs if they worked hard in them. Instead of giving money, however, the Mormon program offered help in finding employment,

food, clothing, and shelter in exchange for work on church farms or canning facilities geared toward filling storehouses for the poor. Local leaders determined the needs of congregants, coordinated labor on church projects, and distributed food and clothing to the poor. Moreover, Latter-day Saint leaders encouraged monthly fasting and donating unspent food money or food itself to the welfare program. The goods from these “fast offerings” went directly to the congregation’s underprivileged. Although a governing committee ensured that local leaders executed the plan properly, administrators granted a great deal of leniency in administering relief. By the end of 1936, 17,000 church members labored on welfare projects, 700 had found gainful employment, and donations rose 67.8 percent above previous levels, and the amount gifted increased 107.3 percent. Over that year the church spent \$800,000 to help the destitute. But through 1937 and 1938, Utah remained fifth in states receiving direct federal aid and enrollment in the WPA and CCC stood 20 percent higher than the national averages. Most impoverished Mormons preferred the New Deal over the church alternative.⁴⁷

Mormon leaders at the time and later historians stressed the apolitical nature of the program, claiming that its efforts derived from purely charitable motives.⁴⁸ Such assertions, however, are misleading. Indeed, some LDS authorities embraced Roosevelt and top administrators distanced themselves from inference of federal criticism.⁴⁹ But many Mormon leaders espoused high hopes of weaning Mormons off federal relief. The Mormon welfare program served a dual purpose. John Mills Whitaker, a key program administrator, privately admitted that the plan functioned both to relieve Mormon suffering and “take them off from Government Relief.”⁵⁰ While church leaders certainly differed in their beliefs about the purpose of the program, the most powerful wished to shun government intervention into individual lives. As Clark, McKay, and Grant explained, the plan sought to teach Mormons to be “fully self supporting” and that “uncorrupted government” promoted such, even if it did emulate a New Deal model in some ways.⁵¹

Though most Latter-day Saints preferred federal aid, Mormon leaders continued to hope that the Church Security Plan could fulfill prophecy. Conservative church authorities wanted to instruct Mormons through their labor in the program that they needed to work endlessly in ensuring the preservation of the Constitution.⁵² The clearest articulation of the program’s eschatological role came from its top administrators, Melvin J. Ballard and Harold B. Lee. In a 1938 sermon, Ballard drew from Smith’s visions arguing that the moment had come for Mormons to rescue the Constitution. First Mormons, and Americans generally, had to be freed from

the “back of the government.” Once liberated, Mormons and their allies could participate in prophecy by saving the Constitution as it hung precariously “by a thread.” A year later, Harold B. Lee reiterated a similar vision. He explained that church relief played a part in Smith’s “modern-day prophesy.” Lee taught that church welfare sought to craft a “perfectly trained army,” so that “when the Constitution shall hang as by a thread” Mormons would be “effective in sustaining it.”⁵³ While Mormon authorities certainly established the relief plan to help members, it also served to dissuade Latter-day Saints from participating in the New Deal and more fully contribute to the battle for the Constitution. Church leaders again drew from their apocalyptic inheritance in anticipation of bringing the laity into the anti-New Deal camp, but coupled it with the material resources provided by the welfare program.⁵⁴

BUILDING CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCES

Almost from the beginning of President Roosevelt’s first term, many Americans criticized his willingness to experiment with federal power and funds. Conservatives from the private, religious, and political sectors assailed what they considered his excessive spending, overtaxation, expansion of federal power, and weakening of the “free” market. Others despised the New Deal’s appropriation of welfare traditionally under the state or city control. Roosevelt’s decision to use the federal government to provide social welfare, seemed to his opponents to place the federal government in a dominant position and created hordes of dependent Americans. A range of critics including evangelical fundamentalists, mainline Protestants, businessmen, journalists, many congressional Republicans, and some southern Democrats viewed Roosevelt as a tyrant eroding cherished American principles.⁵⁵ As this emergent and diverse coalition of conservatives struggled to develop a comprehensive rejoinder to New Deal liberalism, Mormons provided them a shining example—perhaps the best example—of the form their conservative alternative might take.⁵⁶ Those that praised the Mormon program never emulated the system, but the Latter-day Saints provided concrete evidence and a framework around which to develop a comprehensive conservative rhetoric and ideology.

During the Depression, countless Americans struggled to feed their families and survive. Most American churches failed to help them. As Allison Collis Greene has shown, religious groups and charities went broke and turned the responsibility to help the poor over to the growing welfare state to alleviate the vagaries of poverty. Mormons proved to be a conspicuous counterexample.

As other religious institutions, particularly in the South, surrendered responsibility for their people to the federal government, according to Greene, the new Latter-day Saint welfare program appeared capable of helping all Mormons and removing them from federal relief rolls.⁵⁷ Mormon leaders stood defiant while churches from every corner of the United States acquiesced to federal authority. Therefore, the Latter-day Saints' welfare program provided a burgeoning conservative movement with a powerful model around which to critique the New Deal and construct a conservative philosophy.

Mormon acceptance into this anti-New Deal alliance comprised of conspicuous conservative Republicans is ironic given that the GOP considered Mormonism one of the "twin relics of barbarism" along with slavery until the end of the nineteenth century. While the church's abandonment of polygamy in 1890 and general acceptance of conventional American values in the early twentieth century made this association more viable, the Depression truly began bridging the gap. Conservatives celebrated the church leaders' "religious fervor in behalf of constitutional government" in the battle against the New Deal.⁵⁸ Consequently, conservative GOP leaders, particularly Republican national chair John D. Hamilton, targeted Mormons to shore up support in the West due to mutual concerns over the fate of the Constitution and American freedom.⁵⁹ Recognizing these similar anxieties as well, Latter-day Saint authorities worked with the GOP at the national and state level to salvage the United States from the New Deal order.⁶⁰ Despite full acceptance eluding Latter-day Saints, New Deal opposition paved the way for some reconciliation between the GOP and Mormonism. This growing relationship laid the groundwork for Mormons to become powerful players in the party later in the century.

This ambiguous position ironically increased Mormon influence in the nation. One anti-Roosevelt editorialist for the *St. Louis Dispatch* highlighted the distinctiveness of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine, arguing that in the midst of depression "once more, Mormons are exhibiting queerness." Through their welfare program, Mormons again exerted their particularity through successfully rejecting what so many Americans desired—federal relief. Because Latter-day Saints fostered frugality, independence, and self-reliance, the author concluded, "America needs more such queer people."⁶¹ Although Mormons remained mostly outside the American mainstream, their outsider position helped them inch closer to respectability in some circles.

Conservative Mormons used their welfare plan not only to be more fully accepted into the anti-New Deal coalition but position themselves as its leaders. Church administrators believed that the Church Security Plan could

potentially convince Americans to adopt a more constitutional response to economic depression. Clark supposed that in explaining their welfare program to the nation, the church could “set an example” and shoulder “the leadership that is within our reach.”⁶² Mormon Apostle Reed Smoot likewise declared in an interview with the Associated Press that he believed that Mormon welfare “could be an example to the world in being independent of government relief.”⁶³ Wherever conservative Latter-day Saint authorities went, they advertised their plan, heralding it as a definite success even if the rhetoric did not match reality.⁶⁴

Americans immediately took notice of the Mormon welfare system after its public unveiling in April 1936.⁶⁵ The church and its program were in Clark’s words, “put on the spot,” as intended.⁶⁶ Even New Dealers such as Richard Neuberger found something to admire in the Church Security Plan, but conservatives felt most attracted to Mormon welfare.⁶⁷ These anti-New Dealers, according to Martha Emery, writing at the time in the *Nation*, not only “publicized but glorified the undertaking,” often overplaying its success and heralded it as an example of how to end the Depression outside of governmental intervention.⁶⁸ Even if the program was not explicitly anti-New Deal, conservatives readily took it as such and church leaders did little to correct them.⁶⁹ Plenty of tangible evidence existed showing that the plan succeeded. Photographs in newspapers and magazines across the country showed Mormons participating in the program with food and clothing banks full of necessities.⁷⁰ While the welfare plan could never truly remove all Mormons from relief rolls nor lead the country out of depression, it appeared to have the ability to do so and that was enough for church leaders and their conservative allies.

Only a few months after the introduction of the Church Security Plan, conservatives quickly began examining the program. Anti-New Deal journalist David Lawrence, after traveling to Utah to study Mormon welfare firsthand, believed it represented a powerful strike at the federal government. Although still in its “initial stages,” Lawrence admitted, the plan “may be regarded as a substantiation of the theory that local communities and institutions can more quickly weed out idlers than can the Federal Government.”⁷¹ It did not matter that Mormon welfare replicated a model similar to the New Deal. For Lawrence, LDS relief efforts proved that resumption of local control over welfare could more adequately administer relief funds and ensure that money was used correctly. Even the early stages of the Church Security Plan promised anti-New Dealers a concrete example of effective economic relief outside federal welfare.

For conservatives, the church welfare system came to represent a practical response to New Deal liberalism. The historically probusiness *Saturday Evening Post* praised the church for establishing the program, believing that it could eventually take all Americans off the “public dole.” The *Post* declared that the Mormons “have done not only their country but themselves a great service.”⁷² Mormons efficiently gave their community an effective means to combat the New Deal and provided a template for the rest of the nation. A later article in the *Post* by Charles Wilson Murrow expanded on the general applicability of the Church Security Plan. Murrow explained that its power derived not from developing new answers to current issues, but for returning to the “gospel of pioneering days and ways.” Rather than fostering atomization through freely handing out money for individuals to “spend as they like” like the New Deal, the church reinvigorated the American pioneering tradition of free cooperation for the public good. Although Murrow admitted that it was still too early to declare the plan a complete success, he believed very few Mormons still “clung to federal works.”⁷³ Because Mormon welfare looked to a glorious American past of self-reliance and independence, Murrow concluded that it could effectively be applied everywhere with the same success. Like other observers, the *Post* conveniently overlooked the fact that the church replicated some aspects of the New Deal. In their fight against Roosevelt, anti-New Dealers overenthusiastically embraced the Church Security Plan as unambiguous proof of the inadequacies of government intrusion.

That same month, the conservative *New York Herald Tribune*, which became an organ for conservative Republicans later in the century, embraced the Church Security Plan as a concrete rejoinder to Roosevelt as well.⁷⁴ Declaring that “Mormons Show the Way,” the unnamed author celebrated the astute observations of Latter-day Saint leaders in recognizing the hazards of the New Deal and “the demoralization of this program.” The editorialist enthusiastically, yet inaccurately, avowed that the system was so successful that only a “few” Mormons remained on federal relief. Those that remained, implied the author, were not true Mormons as they selfishly worked for their own benefit and not the communal good. What ultimately made the plan worth the nation’s attention was its universal applicability. “What the Mormons have done in Utah and Idaho,” the editorialist argued, “other American communities could also do—if they had but the will.”⁷⁵ For the *Tribune*, the Mormon relief program’s emphasis on self-reliance, frugality, free cooperation, and hard work called Americans to awake from their New Deal stupor and once again embrace their pioneer heritage.

Through analyzing the welfare program, anti-New Dealers found a clearer expression of a conservative ideology. The anti-New Deal magazine the *Commentator*, which sought to establish the GOP as a conservative “opposition party” to New Deal Democrats, likewise found a great deal to praise in the Mormon welfare plan in 1937.⁷⁶ Marc A. Rose praised “Those Marvelous Mormons” for successfully extricating every single Mormon from the New Deal. “Today” Rose claimed, “none of them are on relief. The Church is taking care of its own.” Rose felt the Mormon welfare system promised to revitalize Americans who had “grown soft” under federal intervention and eschewed values of work and independence in favor of an overpowered welfare state. Unlike other Americans, Mormons sought to dig themselves out of the New Deal pit. In providing a system to create vibrant, self-governing individuals, Mormons had done more than any other group in “restoring the morale that long years of dependence upon Uncle Sam have eaten away.”⁷⁷ If the *Commentator* sought to reconstruct the GOP as a decidedly conservative resistance to New Deal liberalism, Mormons provided a clear expression that it must unabashedly advocate for individual liberty, robust self-reliance, and a weak, less intrusive federal government.

The anti-New Deal *Reader's Digest* also applauded the Mormon relief plan as well for its ability to reestablish independence in the American populace.⁷⁸ Republishing the highlights of Rose's essay a few months later, the editors of the *Digest* added the triumphant title “The Mormons March off Relief.” The condensed article highlighted how Mormon welfare provided a way to restore the lost spirit of industry caused by government intrusion into peoples' lives.⁷⁹ In a later *Digest* article, journalist M. R. Werner raised Mormons up as “typifying, with their industry, thrift, and self-reliance, the sturdy virtues of the ‘American way.’” These traits were exemplified as Latter-day Saints established their own “system of work relief” in opposition to federal welfare. Werner did not shy away from noting that church welfare failed to completely eliminate Mormon reliance on the New Deal, yet he presented it as a viable alternative to “state and federal doles.”⁸⁰ For the *Digest*, even if Mormon welfare did not prove to be a completely successful strike at the New Deal, it provided an avenue to shape autonomous Americans free from the clutches of the federal government.

The *Chicago Tribune*, another voice of developing American conservatism, looked upon the Mormon welfare program with great anticipation as it exposed the New Deal's corruption of American values. But the paper also looked to its failure in removing all Mormons from the New Deal.⁸¹ One commenter highlighted the evils of government relief, contrasting the “numbing

effects of the WPA” with the Mormon program’s cultivation of self-reliance and autonomy. Unfortunately, even Mormons succumbed to the insidious lure of New Deal programs and funds despite being provided a better way.⁸² Howard Wood made a similar argument. By Wood’s account, the welfare program should have succeeded marvelously in cultivating a spirit of freedom, but the “luxury” of receiving money for a minimal amount of work “proved too seductive.” Mormons ultimately rejected church welfare, unable to escape the “spirit of laziness and indigence” perpetuated by relief programs that too readily shelled out funds.⁸³ Even as a tragic narrative, the Mormon welfare program served as a powerful lens for conservatives in critiquing what they viewed as the ineffectiveness or debilitating nature of the New Deal.

The Mormon welfare program had deep resonance for religious people across the country. As Mormon leaders unfurled their program, religious bodies found themselves admiring what the Mormons had done. A *Catholic Worker* editorialist believed that Mormons “set an example worthy of imitation by their Catholic fellow countrymen,” while a celebratory news segment from a 1937 episode of the *March of Time* presented Catholic priest John LaFarge admiring the “excellent” Mormon plan.⁸⁴ Just as Mormon anti-New Deal rhetoric and activism built bridges with the GOP, LDS welfare enabled religious groups, which had previously rejected Mormonism, to begin admiring it in some way.

Other religious groups, for example, Aimie Semple McPherson’s Foursquare Church, established successful welfare organizations during the Depression, but none truly emulated the Mormons.⁸⁵ But that did not mean that religious leaders had no use for it. During a Massachusetts Baptist convention held in late October 1936, Reverend Samuel McCauley Lindsay challenged his colleagues to imitate the Latter-day Saints. He admonished his audience to “follow the example of the Mormons in assuming the financial support of all Baptists receiving aid.” Only then, Lindsay argued, could ministers successfully remove Baptists from relief rolls and recertify religious institutions as the prime ameliorator of poverty.⁸⁶ Episcopal priest John Evans also encouraged readers to follow the Mormons. After learning about the program from administrators, Evans concluded that the “facts were made clear,” Mormon welfare “actually works,” adding that in “application of old fashioned principles” the Mormons created a system more effective than anything the federal government offered.⁸⁷ Akin to conservative journalists, religious anti-New Dealers found Mormon welfare to be a tangible model, in this case for reestablishing religious charity as the true way out of economic depression. Even if organizing Christian churches along the lines of

LDS welfare would prove complicated, if not impractical, Lindsay and Evans's admonitions demonstrate that some conservative religious leaders looked to Mormonism for validation that religion must be the charitable center of the United States rather than the government.

In tandem with journalists and ministers, a growing anti-New Deal coalition in Washington, D.C., also began analyzing the Latter-day Saints.⁸⁸ Marriner Eccles recalled in his memoirs that some federal lawmakers used "all weapons . . . to attack the administration."⁸⁹ Mormon welfare came to figure prominently in their assaults. Senator Arthur Vandenberg found in the Mormon plan an example to end increasing government spending and power. Vandenberg stood before the Senate in 1936 and held up the Latter-day Saints as a pattern for Congress to follow. He explained that this "great organization" led the way in restoring "State responsibility and State control in the matter of relief administration." According to Vandenberg, emulating the Mormon plan could decrease the federal debt, reduce the improper use of relief funds, and return power to the states. Echoing his agreement with other conservatives, the senator supposed that by putting power back into the hands of local governments or private institutions as the Mormon program suggested, federal power and spending could be curtailed drastically.⁹⁰ Vandenberg thoroughly believed that the Mormon Security Plan served as a powerful challenge to the New Deal order and accordingly paraded it as a direct challenge to Roosevelt's policies.⁹¹ Like other anti-New Deal commentators, Vandenberg only needed a cursory analysis of LDS welfare to conclude that similar models could supplant ineffective federal welfare.

Additional New Deal opponents likewise latched onto the Mormon welfare system in honing their critiques of Roosevelt and the New Deal. Beginning in January 1938, Marriner Eccles and Virginia senator Harry Byrd began publicly debating New Deal policies.⁹² Eccles defended Roosevelt and Byrd criticized the irresponsible "new liberalism" of the New Deal order.⁹³ During their debates, Byrd turned to the LDS Church "with its fine example of self-reliance." He believed that the program "shed some light upon the effect which our relief system has had upon the morale of . . . those receiving relief." Where the New Deal churned out miserable, dependent Americans, Mormon welfare assisted people "without making them helpless."⁹⁴ Byrd believed that the Mormon system exposed the New Deal for what it really was, a program that created "helpless" Americans dependent on the federal government. The time had come to provide Americans with structures that fostered self-reliance and the Mormon relief plan proposed how to proceed.

Even once avid New Dealers came to admire the potential of Mormon welfare services. Democratic representative from Oregon, Walter Pierce, who generally supported Roosevelt's programs and policies, began expressing serious misgivings in 1939.⁹⁵ He worried that New Deal measures had grown from a "temporary condition" into a "permanent condition," increasing an already substantial federal debt. Pierce pointed Congress to the Mormons who were "setting an example. . . . The plan should be emulated everywhere," he preached. In learning from the Mormons, Americans could once again earn their own money and "take care for themselves."⁹⁶ While not necessarily abandoning the idea of an active government, Pierce held that government programs and spending had played their part. Now the nation's leaders needed to retreat so that Americans could learn to take care of themselves once more.

For Americans who had grown weary of the New Deal, the Mormon welfare program provided an important framework for attacking Roosevelt's policies and constructing a conservative response to them. One Arizona anti-Roosevelt newspaper explained in 1940 that Mormon welfare succeeded in two ways. First, it successfully "helped its members retain their independence" as other Americans acquiesced their freedom to the New Deal. Second, it provided a critique of irresponsible federal programs that grew accustomed to "handing out cash and commodities . . . without asking anything in return."⁹⁷ For a rising conservative movement, Mormon welfare services provided a template for redeeming Americans from the New Deal and constructing a comprehensive ideology to challenge Rooseveltian liberalism. Conservatives ultimately suggested that the plan had the power to dethrone the New Deal, allowing Americans to contribute to the national well-being and gain their independence once more. Encouraged by their apocalyptic urgency to save their nation, Mormon leaders gave voice to a young conservative movement.

CONCLUSION

After the embers of World War II had cooled, Mormons and their welfare program continued to attract the attention of conservatives. The *Reader's Digest* in 1949 praised the "extraordinary Welfare Program" for putting Mormons to work during the Depression, while Republican journalist Chester Hanson believed the system provided a way to decrease federal spending and allow Americans to become independent "from either church or state."⁹⁸ Joseph Weston likewise believed that the "immediate success" of LDS social

activism exposed the inadequacies of federal welfare and provided a way to return power to local governments and restructure welfare policy to eliminate expensive programs that strained American finances.⁹⁹ For the American conservative movement, Mormons became powerful exemplars and welcome allies in battling the liberal order established by the New Deal. Where other religious groups turned their congregation's welfare over to the federal government believing they had no other choice, Mormons visibly and boldly resisted federal incursion.¹⁰⁰ Latter-day Saints became a "model minority" in the 1930s, prime specimens for conservatives to analyze in learning how to resist the advance of the welfare state during and after the Great Depression.¹⁰¹

While the Mormon welfare program never truly turned every Mormon away from Roosevelt or the New Deal, its leaders began a process that slowly brought the majority of the church's membership into the conservative movement. These leaders not only connected Mormons to the modern American conservative movement, but also participated in the construction of the American conservative ideology itself. From a disorganized, impotent, and dispersed collection of anti-New Dealers, Latter-day Saints helped craft a more structured, coherent, and powerful philosophy that challenged liberalism well beyond welfare policy even influencing the ideals of "compassionate conservatism" later in the decade. Thus, when the American conservative movement began solidifying after World War II, Mormon leaders, and increasingly lay people, found that they resided comfortably at the very heart of this crusade.

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NOTES

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2. Luke Perry and Christopher Cronin, *Mormonism in American Politics: From Persecution to Power* (Santa Barbara, 2012), 77–83.

3. "The Political Preferences of U.S. Religious Groups," *Pew Research Center* (accessed 2 March 2017), http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/ft_16-0222_religionpoliticalaffiliation_640px-2/. See also Perry and Cronin, *Mormonism in American Politics*, 69–72.

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Right (Princeton, 2002); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2007); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2007).

5. Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007): 106–7, 141, 162; Neil J. Young, “‘The ERA Is a Moral Issue’: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 623–44. Historians have begun arguing that Mormons have been part of the Religious Right Since the 1950s. See Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York, 2015).

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8. Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), chap. 8; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2011); Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, 2015); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, 2009).

9. John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), 121–22, 149. See also Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana, 1993).

10. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, 1989), xi.

11. Shipps, “Ezra Taft Benson and the Conservative Turn of ‘Those Amazing Mormons,’” 59–61.

12. Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 5, 7.

13. Brian Q. Cannon, “Mormons and the New Deal: The 1936 Presidential Election in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 5, 7, 16.

14. Pinning down conservatism is no easy task, and the Great Depression only complicates the issue. New Dealers saw themselves preserving the capitalist and constitutional structures of the United States. Conservatism during the Depression was far from a coherent and viable movement, yet businessmen, journalists, intellectuals, and politicians slowly began coalescing in opposition to New Deal policies and programs. Although not yet a self-conscious crusade, they feared Roosevelt introduced socialism and eroded the US Constitution. In combating FDR’s program, they promoted limited government, individual liberty, and the free market, later hallmarks of the American conservative movement. These individuals are labeled as conservative or anti-New Deal throughout this study. See Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy*, 7–8, 10–11.

15. Some historians might question how a marginalized religious minority in the American West could drive national politics in any meaningful way. Yet, nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy drove a massive revision of the First Amendment and federal oversight

into the personal, religious lives of Americans. Influence is not necessarily contingent on size or numbers of political elites. Small, often persecuted, religious groups outsize their influence because their position as outsiders make them more conspicuous, not less so. See, for example, the role of Jehovah's Witnesses in pushing the Supreme Court to honor the rights of minority groups during World War II in Shawn Francis Peters *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution* (Lawrence, Kans., 2000).

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