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IN THIS ISSUE

106 Buchanan, Popular Sovereignty, and the Mormons: The Election of 1856
By Ronald W. Walker

133 Women and the Kindergarten Movement in Utah
By Andrea Ventilla

149 Taylor A. Woolley: Utah Architect and Draftsman to Frank Lloyd Wright
By Peter L. Goss

159 Safety Lessons: The 1938 Burgon’s Crossing School Bus and Train Accident
By Eric G. Swedin

169 The Renaissance Man of Delta: Frank Asahel Beckwith, Millard County Chronicle Publisher, Scientist, and Scholar, 1875-1951
By David A. Hales

187 IN MEMORIAM: Jay M. Haymond, 1933-2013

BOOK REVIEWS

John G. Turner. Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet
Reviewed by Newell G. Bringhamhurth

Kenneth L. Alford, ed. Civil War Saints
Reviewed by Gene A. Sessions

Reviewed by Douglas D. Alder

Erin Ann Thomas. Cool in Our Veins: A Personal Journey
Reviewed by Edward A. Geary

Victoria D. Burgess. The Midwife: A Biography of Laurine Ekstrom Kingston
Reviewed by Melissa Ferguson

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Buchanan, Popular Sovereignty, and the Mormons: The Election of 1856

BY RONALD W. WALKER

During the last week of February 1857, with clouds dark and lowering, the citizens of Lancaster, Pennsylvania turned out to say goodbye to their favorite son, James Buchanan, who was on his way to become the fifteenth president of the United States. Buchanan had been elected after a tumultuous contest, which had more than its share of moral and political theater. Buchanan had won on a platform of "popular

The Musical Fund Hall in Philadelphia where the Republican Party met in 1856 to nominate John C. Fremont as its presidential candidate and adopt a platform calling for the abolition of the "twin relics of barbarism"—slavery and polygamy.

Ronald W. Walker is a professional historian living in Salt Lake City who has published widely on Utah and Mormon history.

sovereignty," which promised American territories the right to make decisions about their "domestic institutions." Before the election was over, however, politicians also raised a side issue: Did popular sovereignty apply to the Mormons in distant Utah? And what should be done with these peculiar people? While these questions may have not have influenced many ballots, they were important to Utah. They set the stage for the Utah War by increasing the public's hostility to the Mormon people. They also revealed the hopes of the Saints, who, contrary to some historians, wanted local decision-making, not political independence. It is a story that historians have largely left untold.  

As Buchanan's carriage made its way to the railroad station, the crowd cheered wildly, which brought the president-elect to protest: It was not right, he modestly said, for a mortal man to receive such homage.  

This was exactly the kind of heavy comment that people came to expect of Buchanan, whose self-importance reflected the general belief that he was one of the best prepared politicians to gain the White House. He was hoping that his administration might equal or exceed Washington's, he told close advisors, and certainly the times required a great man. The nation seemed overtaken by political violence and low political practices. Everyone was talking about the slave question. Could the Union endure?  

Buchanan had been at the political game longer than most could remember. Early in his career, he had served in the Pennsylvania legislature and then four terms in the House as a member of the Federalist party, before joining the Democrats and supporting Andrew Jackson's bid for the presidency in 1828. The move put Buchanan in the political mainstream, just as the Democratic Party was beginning its thirty-year ascendancy. Jackson, who some said really did not like Buchanan, put aside his distaste to appoint him to the legation at St. Petersburg in Russia. During this tour Buchanan found himself in his natural element. He learned fine wines and cigars. He also learned that he could hold his own with some of the best diplomats in Europe.  

The classic study for the politics of 1856 and the Mormon question is Richard D. Poll, "The Mormon Question, 1850-1865: A Study of Politics and Public Opinion." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1948), which served as the basis for Poll's, "The Mormon Question: Enters National Politics, 1850-1856," Utah Historical Quarterly 25 (1957): 117-31. Poll's main interest was how the Mormon question affected national politics—and not how the election shaped Utah. Nor did Poll have available to him many national newspapers and several important sources now available at the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. Subsequent studies of the Utah War, more by omission than by argument, have also downplayed the election's impact. See Norman F. Furniss, The Mormon Conflict, 1830-59 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1960) and William P. Mackinnon, At Sword's Point, Part I: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858 (Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008); 56. David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, The Mormon Rebellion: America's First Civil War, 1857-1858 (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2011) also minimized the election, while suggesting that the Utah Saints sought political or national independence.  


Klein, President James Buchanan, xvii.  

When Buchanan returned home, Pennsylvania chose him as one of its senators. He served for the next decade. Although hard-working and devoted to his political party and generally well respected, he never escaped the shadows. He was unable or unwilling to attach his name to any important piece of legislation—never becoming the center of interest or debate. He liked instead to work behind the scenes, perhaps in small groups or at one of his famous dinner parties, where he was at his best. He never hazarded himself too far on any issue, gaining the sobriquet, "Friend of the Obvious."

Buchanan was a perpetual candidate for the U.S. presidency, in 1844, 1848, and 1852, usually by coyly staying above the fray and "reluctantly" making himself available. One observer remarked, "Never did a wily politician more industriously plot and plan to secure a nomination than Mr. Buchanan did, in his still hunt for the Presidency." Compensations came along the way. James K. Polk made him his secretary of state and eight years later, Franklin Pierce, another man who beat him out for the presidency, offered him a seat on the Supreme Court (which Buchanan turned down) before appointing him minister plenipotentiary to the Court of St. James in London.

Buchanan was in London when the campaign of 1856 began. He had an unusual credential. By "freak fate," he had always been out of Congress during the great debates over the extension of slavery and therefore carried no heavy sectional baggage. As a result, his supporters argued he could unite the Democratic party and finally carry the election. He remained properly modest. "I know...that you would consider me in a state of mental delusion if I were to say how indifferent I feel in regard to myself on the question of the next Presidency," Buchanan wrote to a possible supporter. However, the next breath kept the door open. The next presidential term, he gravely warned, would likely be "the most important and responsible of any which has occurred since the origin of the Government," which meant that "no competent and patriotic man" could shrink from such a duty. He was waiting in the wings.

One of Buchanan's rivals for the Democratic Party's nomination was the "Little Giant"—Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. Aware that economic and political power were shifting to the North, Douglas and other party leaders wanted to get the slave question out of Congress where southern representatives were fighting a rearguard action for their "rights." Douglas's plan for sectional peace was to let the people in the territories decide on slavery for themselves. He called his proposal "popular sovereignty."

1 Klein, President James Buchanan, 142.
2 Ben Perley Poole as cited in Klein, President James Buchanan, 194.
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He had an f Congress ore carried 1 he could : remained te of men-self on the supporter. ntial term, possible of rich meant a duty.” He on was the aware that Douglas and res where it “rights,” territories sovereignty,”
or sometimes “popular democracy” or “squatter democracy.”

These phrases were not new. They had been around at least since the 1600s when the English Puritans used them against the Stuart kings. The American colonists had used them, too, when fighting the crown-appointed officers before and during the American revolution. The idea of popular sovereignty lay at the root of the famed Northwest Ordinance of 1787 when America promised self-government and eventual state-hood to the settlers living in the western lands of the new republic. But the Ordinance, despite its good intentions, posed problems. It required a step-by-step process that might require many years to complete, during which time, according to one historian, “the rights of self-government that most white males elsewhere took for granted,” including the right to elect leaders and make local laws, were withheld. During this awkward stage, territorial governments were “colonial” in the sense that outsiders were generally appointed by a distant central government to hold local executive and judicial offices. Self-government was postponed. Douglas wanted to end this situation while at the same time he was making a series of political calculations. With people in the territories exercising their “popular sovereignty” to decide the slave question for themselves, he hoped to temper the South’s rising spirit of secession and bring peace to the nation. Along the way, the South might pick up a few new states friendly to its cause. Of course, personal ambition was a factor, too. If his policies were a success, he might be that much closer to taking up quarters at the Executive Mansion. His first step was some language he inserted into the omnibus Compromise of 1850. Four years later he got the Nebraska–Kansas Act through Congress, which promised these territories the right to decide whether slavery should exist within their boundaries.

When the Democratic Party met for its national convention in Cincinnati during the summer of 1856, delegates made “popular sovereignty” the centerpiece of their platform. They then turned to selecting a nominee. The leading candidates were incumbent president Franklin Pierce, Stephen Douglas, and James Buchanan. On the sixteenth ballot, the convention

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finally went for Buchanan, who accepted by writing a formal letter filled with the diplomatic phrases for which he was famous. The Kansas-Nebraska Act “does no more than give the force of law to this elementary principle of self-government,” Buchanan told the delegates. At stake was neither slavery nor anti-slavery, but democracy, Buchanan said, who insisted that the position was the political high road. “How vain and illusory would any other principle prove in practice in regard to the Territories,” he wrote. Buchanan probably went further than he wished. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed Congress two years earlier, he had silently wrung his hands with indecision and foreboding from the safe distance of London. But now party unity required him to agree. He was also setting aside his well-known antipathy for Douglas, which was fully reciprocated (when Buchanan was Secretary of State, Douglas had turned down one Buchanan dinner invitation after another).

Buchanan’s letter to the convention also had a few words to say about religion. “No party founded on religious or political intolerance towards one class of American citizens, whether born in our own or in a foreign land, can long continue to exist in this country,” he said, probably with an eye to putting down the anti-Catholicism in the country. “We are all equal before God and the Constitution and the spirit of despotism and bigotry which would create odious distinction among our fellow-citizens will be speedily rebuked by a free and enlightened public opinion.” These words came from a man who some said was among the most religious ever to be elected to the presidency. Although he put off a formal declaration of an institutional faith, he had been raised under the stern demands of his Scotch-Irish forebears, and he regularly attended services and paid his pew fees. A further measure of his feeling, he tried to find time each day to read

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12 James Buchanan to the Committee of Notification, June 16, 1856, Moore, The Works of James Buchanan, 10:81-5.
from the Bible or from one of the popular scriptural homilies of the time, and he prayed as often. He looked for God’s hand in human events. He closed his letter with a summary of his religion, sense of providence, and U.S. Constitutionalism, which had been the anchors of his life. “Let us humbly implore His continued blessings,” he wrote, and pray “He may avert from us the punishment we justly deserve for being discontented and ungrateful while enjoying privileges above all nations, under such a constitution and such a Union as has never been vouchsafed to any other people.”

Buchanan and the Democratic Party had two opponents during the election. The American Party fielded Millard Fillmore, an upstate New Yorker and former U.S. President, who during his career had shown surprising kindness to the Mormons. First he had appointed Brigham Young, the Mormon leader, to be governor of the newly created Utah Territory in 1850. He then retained Young during the “Runaway Controversy” a year later, when territorial officers in Utah left their posts and clamored for a new governor and the dispatch of U.S. troops to the western territory. The American Party hoped to steer a middle course in the politics of the time, and it hoped to capture the votes of old-line Whigs, whose party had collapsed before the sectional crisis. Unfortunately, the American Party also had a mean streak about it. Many of its members opposed Masons, Catholics, and the new immigrants who were flooding the nation and threatening “traditional” values. Buchanan’s words about religion were meant to strike a blow against the American Party’s intolerance and nativism and to win as many Irish–Catholic votes as possible.

The Republicans also opposed the Democrats. These men were members of a new party, only a couple of years old, that stood for a liberal policy of dispensing western lands to homesteaders, a national program of public works such as a transcontinental railroad, and the regulating of commerce from Washington. Above all else, it wanted an end to the compromises over the possible extension of slavery—the party believed that “popular sovereignty” was a dodge to avoid making hard, moral decisions. For their presidential candidate, the party overlooked some of its most able and seasoned leaders, such as New York Senator William H. Seward or Ohio’s Salmon P. Chase, in favor of “Pathfinder” John C. Frémont, famous for four explorations of the American West as well as for his impulsive, insubordinate dash. In sum, the Republicans declared themselves alliteratively to favor “Free Soil, Free Men, and Frémont.”

Events in Kansas Territory were a backdrop to the election. Shortly after Congress declared itself in favor of letting territories decide for themselves about slavery, pro-slavery Missourians crossed the Kansas border to elect candidates of their choosing. Northerners responded with young men from

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9 Auchampaugh, *James Buchanan and His Cabinet*, 159-60, 198.
the Midwest and New England, who entered Kansas to cast opposing ballots. Soon Kansas had rival legislatures, rival governors, and rival capitals—and a rising tide of violence that mocked the ideals of democracy and fair play. After seven hundred pro-slavers took the abolitionist stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas, and burned its “Free State Hotel” and broke up two newspapers, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner furiously denounced the “Crime Against Kansas” on the floor of the upper chamber. Sumner’s violence with words was met with actual physical violence: Preston Brooks, a South Carolina congressman, beat Sumner with a heavy cane while Sumner sat at his desk in the Senate chamber, inflicting injuries from which Sumner never fully recovered. Two days later the half-crazed abolitionist, John Brown, along with a small band of like-minded men, butchered five pro-slavery men in Kansas. Brown split open the head of one man and chopped his arms from his body. In a wild response, four hundred Missourian “Border Ruffians” leveled the town of Osawatomie, Kansas, and killed one of Brown’s sons. As the election of 1856 approached, the cycles of voting fraud, property damage, and killing were transforming the territory into what Horace Greeley and the New York Tribune called “Bleeding Kansas.”

All these issues and events were prologue to the “Mormon issue.” Most Americans knew at least something about the Mormons, whose church had been established in 1830 in upstate New York and had taken the formal name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Americans generally knew, too, strife seemed to go hand-in-hand with these people. They had been driven from New York to Ohio and then to Missouri, Illinois, and most recently to Utah Territory. Buchanan had more than a nodding acquaintance with them. In 1839 he had met with President Van Buren and Joseph Smith, the Mormon founding prophet, when Smith came to Washington to ask for help after his people had been forced to leave Missouri. Buchanan was Secretary of State when the government enrolled five hundred Mormons to serve in the Mexican War. He had also donated to the national relief campaign to aid the Mormon refugees strung across the plains of Iowa during their “exodus” to Utah.

The Mormons continued to make news once they settled in Utah. The “Runaways” created headlines with their claims that Young was disloyal and was a polygamist. In 1852 the Mormons officially admitted their plural marriage. The following year Indians in central Utah killed U.S. Army

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Captain John Gunnison, along with a half dozen of Gunnison’s men. Although the Indians had attacked the troopers for the killing of one of their leaders by emigrants a few weeks before, many easterners put the blame on the Mormons. Some non-Mormons in Utah, whom Utahns called “Gentiles,” agreed, and they said the Mormons were trying to turn the Indians against the nation.

It is not clear what motivated the anti-Mormons. Some were put off by Young, others by nothing more than an anti-Mormon scorn. Still others were unscrupulous opportunists, who hoped for government contracts if power shifted away from the local people. Some opposition reflected the delicate insecurities of Americans themselves. On the other hand, some argued on grounds of principle and vision. They believed that the Mormons, with their polygamy and theocracy, did not fit into the usual American mold—Utah seemed too seventeenth-century Puritan, too odd and anxious, and too millenarian. These men, in and outside of Utah, believed the nation had to bring the saints under control.

By the beginning of 1856, Utah’s delegate to Congress, John M. Bernhisel, knew that the opposition to his people was strong and growing. Bernhisel, an unassuming and temperate man, was everything that the supposedly fanatical Mormons were not. He had been trained as a medical doctor at the University of Pennsylvania and once served as Joseph Smith’s physician and attaché. He had another advantage: He was a one-wife man and a reluctant one at that—he had waited until the age of forty-six to marry. His quiet diplomacy had won many friends in Washington, and when necessary he could speak his mind to President Young, although always in his quiet and well-spoken way.

Bernhisel began the year with a public letter to the Washington Union, the Democrats’ party newspaper. A simple visit to Utah’s “longitudes,” Bernhisel said, would quickly dispel any idea that the Mormons were disloyal. Nor was there truth about Young’s publicized statement that he intended to remain as Utah’s governor, whatever the costs. Bernhisel said Young had merely expressed his “devout submission to the Providence which rules all created things” (Young’s belief in providence at least equaled Buchanan’s). Finally, he denied rumors that Utah had thirty thousand under arms (another report Bernhisel cited said seven thousand “disciplined” troops), although the territory, like most American communities, had a

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11 Washington Union, January 4, 1856.
militia to keep order. Bernhisel was trying to put out fires, and his various
denials were a catalog about what was being said about the Mormons.21

Bernhisel's private letters to Young were also full of foreboding. Congress
would never reconfirm Young as governor as things stood, Bernhisel told
the Mormon leader. The best that could be done was to let the matter slide,
which effectively would allow Young to stay in office into the indefinite
future. Meanwhile, Bernhisel told Young to expect no favors from
Congress, like the building of a new road from Great Salt Lake City to Fort
Bridger or paying off some of the costs of a recent "Walker" Indian war. He
also warned that Utah's new attempt to secure statehood was doomed from
the start. "The bitter and cruel prejudice against us as a people is such,
ostensibly on account of the plurality doctrine, but the true cause probably
lies much deeper."22 Bernhisel was speaking of the prejudice that he was
meeting on every side.

The question of statehood also raised the explosive issue of whether
"popular sovereignty" applied to Utah.23 What was good for the
Democrats' goose (the extension of slavery) might equally serve the
Mormon gander (polygamy), Republicans were sure to say. For Americans
unwilling to accept Utah's unusual marriage system, Utah statehood
showed just how pernicious the constitutional doctrine of "popular
sovereignty" might be.

Popular sovereignty and polygamy had been linked before. Shortly after
the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, newspapers opposed to Douglas in
Illinois had suggested that the senator had a hidden purpose. Douglas, who
had forged friendly or at least political ties with the Mormons while they
were his constituents, had used the phrase domestic institutions when writing
the Kansas-Nebraska Act. What institutions did Douglas have in mind
besides slavery, it was asked? Could he also be talking about polygamy? The
prominent, early twentieth-century historian-politician, Albert J. Beveridge,
reviewing the political back-and-forth in Illinois in the middle 1850s, put
polygamy at the head of a list of secondary issues facing Douglas in the
state's political wars, after the extension of slavery itself.24

Nor had the linkage passed the notice of Senator Sumner, who saw the
political and moral advantage of putting polygamy and popular sovereignty
side-by-side. "I presume no person could contend that a polygamous
husband, resident in one of the States, would be entitled to enter the
national Territory with his harem—his property if you please—and there
claim immunity," Sumner had protested when the Kansas-Nebraska Law
was being debated in the nation. "Clearly, when he [the polygamist] passes

21 Bernhisel to Brigham Young, January 17, 1856 and March 18, 1856, Church History Library. Last
citation has the quotation.
23 Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858, 4 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin
the bounds of that local jurisdiction which sanctions polygamy, the peculiar domestic relation would cease; and it is precisely the same with Slavery.25

Historian Richard Noll found the similar tie after Franklin Pierce in 1853 recommended that the federal lands in Utah and New Mexico territories be surveyed and made available to settlers.26 The House Committee on Public Lands reported a bill that proposed “that the benefits of this act shall not extend to any person who shall now, or at any time hereafter, be the husband of more than one wife.”27 The proposed bill set off a warm debate over the constitutionality of federal authority and local decision-making, and to avoid the dangerous issue Congress finally removed from the legislation any provision about ownership and instead simply appointed a surveyor-general for Utah to measure metes and bounds. For the next fifteen years, Utahns would bristle over their inability to secure legal title to their lands, claiming their religion was being used as an excuse to deny them the land rights extended elsewhere. The privileges of the federal domain were not given Utah until 1869.28

The issue of polygamy and popular sovereignty would not go away. The St. Louis Republican looked at the constitution Utahns were proposing and saw conspiracy. “The plan of crimes, mutually tolerating each other, seems to be spreading shameless iniquities, seeking the possession of new territories,” the newspaper opined. Slavery and polygamy were trying to “jointly possess the land.” The Republican’s comments came despite the proposed Utah constitution saying nothing about either slavery or polygamy—Utahns hoped that silence might increase the chances of their bid. The editorial reached even upstate New York where the celebrated Frederick Douglass’s Paper, the organ of the former slave and now a crusading abolitionist, put it into its pages.29

It was probably inevitable that the polygamy issue would find its way into the Republican Party’s platform in 1856, given the strong views being bandied about. The party met in Philadelphia in the middle of June, two weeks after Democrats had selected Buchanan and popular sovereignty. Californian John A. Wilkes was given the task of writing the first draft of the plank on federal authority in the territories, and he decided to join slavery and polygamy together, “to make war upon polygamy, and at the same time strengthen the case against slavery,” he later said. “Polygamy was already odious in the public mind and a growing evil,” and both “social institutions [slavery and polygamy] rested precisely on the same constitutional basis,”

27 Congressional Globe, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, 1092.
29 St. Louis Republican, May 28, 1856, and “State of Deseret,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper [Syracuse, New York], June 13, 1856, as archived in Historian’s Office, Historical Scrapbooks, 1840-1904, LDS Church History Library.
with popular sovereignty sheltering each. Willis's resolution declared Federal power. "Resolved, That the Constitution confers upon Congress sovereign power over the territories of the United States for their government, and that in the exercise of this power it is both the right and the duty of Congress to prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism—polygamy and slavery."30

When Willis submitted his draft proposal to the larger committee, he met two objections. First, one party leader complained that the resolution was repeating itself. Wasn't polygamy just another form of slavery? Another objection was about style. Were the Republicans going to stoop to epithets? In the end, both complaints were swept aside, and the highly charged words, "the Twin Relics of Barbarism," were retained as useful "instrumentalities in political warfare." When presented to the delegates, the resolution was approved with "rapturous enthusiasm."31 After all, Republican politicians and newspapers had been saying as much for two years, but without the catchphrase that transformed heavy political arguments into a campaign war cry. With the words sounding deep within the Republican soul, "The Twin Relics of Barbarism" became one of the more famous slogans of American presidential politics.

The conventions had done their work, and now came the campaigning. The Democrats stood for preserving the Union—and the old, proven ways of their political power, which put a premium upon local and states rights and the hope of keeping the issue of slavery off the national agenda. In contrast, the Republicans were proposing the radical expansion of federal power, mainly to curb the moral evil of slavery. Somewhere in the tumult was the Mormon question, which more than one Republican warrier pressed to his bosom. According to New York Senator William H. Seward, perhaps the leading man of the party, slavery and polygamy went hand-in-hand. To allow either Utah into the Union as a polygamous state or Kansas as a slave state "will bear heavily, perhaps conclusively, on the fortunes of the entire conflict between Freedom and Slavery," he said.32 He had been making the same argument for several years.33

The New York Herald put the matter in down-to-earth tones that was typical with the newspaper: "And here comes a nice question—nicer than niggers—between Congress and squatter sovereignty. Does Congress or does squatter sovereignty cover the question of polygamy? Does the constitution reach it? What is to be done with it? The question will soon be put, and it will have to be met... Utah and the saints must be looked after."34

33 Congressional Globe, 33rd Congress, 1st session, appendeix, 154.
34 New York Herald, June 17, 1856.
Buchanan and Frémont observed the protocols of the time by letting their supporters do the campaigning. Less than a week after the Republican convention, former Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton launched an attack upon President Franklin Pierce for not taking action against the Mormons. Benton had been an arch-nemesis of the saints since the late 1830s when Missouri ultras had driven them from the state. The intervening years had not softened his opposition. He now claimed that Utah represented a “state of things at which morality, decency, [and] shame revolts,” with Brigham Young defiant in his power. As a leading Democrat, Benton was trying to prevent the Republicans from tarring the Grand Democracy with the Mormon brush—making people think that popular sovereignty somehow put the Democrats on the side of the saints. When it came time to cast his vote, Benton went for Buchanan, despite being Frémont’s father-in-law.36

Republican Congressman Justin S. Morrill of Vermont also used strong language. Morrill, one of the party’s founding fathers, labeled polygamy an “abomination” and created a “sensation” in the House by proposing national legislation to end it. He was aiming squarely at overturning Democratic constitutional doctrine, claiming that Washington had “exclusive jurisdiction” in the territories and that “no principle of self-government or citizen sovereignty” could possibly justify Mormon plurality. His bill called for a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars against polygamists and a stiff prison sentence of two to five years on any “person” marrying a plural spouse or sexually “cohabiting” with them. Morrill’s loosely drawn

36 Extract of Thomas H. Benton’s Speech at St. Louis, June 21, 1856, from unnamed newspaper, Historian’s Office, Historical Scrapbooks, 1840-1904, box 1, folder 4, book 4, page 42, Church History Library.
provisions put Mormon women as well as Mormon men at risk—and theoretically any non-Mormon living in the territories who might be involved in an extended sexual relationship outside of marriage. Morrill would introduce one anti-LDS bill after another during the next twenty years.

Morrill’s bill combined moral reform with shrewd politics, which continued with parade float and banner during the next months. According to nineteenth-century Utah historian, Edward Tullidge, “every campaign where John C. Frémont was the standard bearer of the party, there could be read: The abolition of slavery and polygamy; the twin relics of barbarism!” Incidental evidence suggests that Tullidge was not exaggerating too much. An Indianapolis, Indiana, rally had “Brigham Young, with six wives most fashionably dressed, hoop skirts and all, each with a little Brigham in her arms,” occupying one parade wagon drawn by a yoke of pioneer oxen. “Brigham,” said the correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, “was making himself as useful and interesting as possible among his white, black and piebald better-halves. He also held a banner inscribed ‘Hurrah for the Kansas-Nebraska bill—it introduces Polygamy and Slavery.’” The parade attracted a reported crowd of sixty thousand people.

A handbill, allegedly written by the Mormons, was distributed at a pre-election rally in Philadelphia. Addressed to the “Faithful Followers of the Lord, and Recipients of His Grace,” it claimed to give advice. “We call upon you to stand firm to the principles of our religion in the coming contest for President of the country,” it said. “The Democratic Party is the instrument in God’s hand, by which is to be effected our recognition as a sovereign State, with the domestic institutions of slavery and polygamy, as established by the patriarchs and prophets of old, under divine authority, and renewed in the saints of Latter-day, through God’s chosen rulers and prophets.” In contrast, the handbill said the Republicans were standing in the way of the saints and the fulfillment of the scripture when in the last days “seven women [shall] lay hold to one man.” The flyer was supposedly ordered by “the President and Rulers, at Great Salt Lake on the Fourteenth Day of August, 1856.”

It was a fake, of course. It used words that were neither a part of the style nor the vocabulary of the Mormons, and nothing in the present-day church archives gives the document the least credence. It was undoubtedly the product of some Republican operatives who hoped to use anti-Mormon prejudice to peel votes from Buchanan—what modern politicians would call “dirty tricks.” Nevertheless, leading opinion-makers took the

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56 Edward W. Tullidge. History of Salt Lake City (Salt Lake City: By the Author, 1886), 140.
58 Ibid.
59 As reproduced in The Mormon, November 15, 1856.
bait. Shortly after the election, Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* printed the broadside as well as an article that opined that Buchanan, “old bachelor though he is” (Buchanan never married) had become the instrument of Mormon hopes for getting Utah and polygamy into the Union—perhaps the Mormons even hoped that Buchanan at the right time might renounce “his bachelorship, . . . [and] make up for lost time by taking [the prescribed] seven wives.” The sarcasm of the article was aimed at the slave-holders of the South: Because southerners made slaves their concubines, it was a small step for them to accept the Mormon version of sexual plurality, especially if it might gain the South two votes in the Senate once Utah got into the Union. The *New York Herald* also printed the handbill, and it became grist for such politicians as Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois and Representative Morrill, who saw it as another example of the saints’ treachery.42

During the first week of July, President Pierce summoned Bernhisel to the White House to give him a dressing-down. Pierce was furious about rumors he was hearing concerning the Mormons’ supposedly rigging or tampering with juries—no doubt an echo from the Gunnison trial. Moreover, Pierce had heard that Governor Young was preaching the doctrine of exclusion, that is, telling the saints not to have anything to do with Gentile outsiders.

U.S. army officers and Utah’s federal territorial officials had been experiencing one run-in after another with the Utah settlers, and their one-sided and exaggerated reports had been flowing to the nation’s capital for several years. Sometime after his stressful meeting with Pierce, Bernhisel met with an excited congressman, who wanted to cut off a shipment of arms to Utah’s territorial militia. “We shall have trouble with your people,” the congressman told Bernhisel, “and I think we should not put arms into their hands.” Of greatest concern to Bernhisel, however, was the looming Morrill Anti-Polygamy bill, which he now thought would get through the House, although he hoped that he had enough votes in the Senate to kill it. “The feeling and prejudice among members of both branches of the national Legislature against Utah, and its domestic institution were never before so great as at this time, and the hostile feeling seems to be on the increase, and is not confined to northern [Republican] members alone, but is shared by some southern members, slave holders, who profess to believe in the principle of [federal] non-intervention [in the territories].”43 The latter were running for political cover because of the Republican campaign assaults.

John Taylor and George A. Smith—the two men given the task of presenting Utah’s statehood petition to Congress—did not know what to do. They were among Utah’s best and ablest. Both had served in the local
territorial assembly and, reflecting Utah's church-state condition, also had high church office as members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, second only to Young's three-man First Presidency. Taylor's most recent assignment was to preside over the church's eastern missions and to publish the New York-based newspaper, *The Mormon*, which put him in the cockpit of the war of words. Smith, a cousin of founding-prophet Joseph Smith and the youngest apostle ever chosen for the Quorum, had Falstaffian wit and girth and the easy way of a natural politician. Both Taylor and Smith felt the heavy duty of being on a religious and political mission.

They had arrived in Washington during the summer of 1856 and immediately sought the advice of Senator Douglas, who must have remembered one of his talks with Joseph Smith. Smith predicted a bright future for Douglas, including a quest for the U.S. presidency—though Smith's prediction had come with a warning. "If ever you turn your hand against me or the Latter day Saints you will feel the weight of the hand of the Almighty upon you," Smith reportedly had said, "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."44 Douglas had helped the saints many times in the intervening years, perhaps for political reasons, but the saints saw in Douglas a man whose sympathies for them ran warm and perhaps deep.45 Douglas had aided the saints' trek west by supplying government maps and reports, and several Mormon letters since had warmly renewed the bond.46 One of Young's letters to Douglas repeatedly called him a "friend."47 In the first months of 1850, during the preliminaries before the Congress enacted its great sectional compromise of that year, Douglas had laid before the Senate an earlier Utah petition for statehood.48

When Taylor and Smith approached Douglas, they knew that the Mormon situation had become difficult. The "twin relics" platform, Taylor fumed, had been a "mean, dastardly act" that had used polygamy as a wedge issue against the Democrats, the Mormons' natural political allies. Taylor complained that the Democrats, thrown back on their heels, were showing an anti-Mormon zeal that put even the Republicans "in the shade." The Mormons had become "the great national political shuttlecock, to be bandied by every political battledore."49

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44 Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, CR 100 102, volume 11, pp. 197–8, May 18, 1843; Brigham Young to Stephan A. Douglas, May 2, 1861, Brigham Young Office Files, CR 1234, box 5, volume 5, p. 783.
46 "Orson Hyde to the Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, April 26, 1844, 5, Joseph Smith Papers, box 3, fol. 6, Church History Library.
47 Brigham Young to Stephen A. Douglas, April 29, 1854, Young Correspondence.
49 "Report of Taylor and Smith to the Utah Legislative Assembly," printed in Everet L. Cooley, comp., "Journals of the Legislative Assembly Territory of Utah Seventh Annual Session, 1857–1858," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 24 (October 1956), 346–8; John Taylor to Brigham Young, July 12, 1856, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library.
Yet, Douglas appeared to be sympathetic. As chairman of the Senate’s powerful committee on territories, Douglas told the Mormon representatives he had been able to defeat the mad rush to dismantle Utah Territory by giving its land to surrounding states and territories—the objective was to neuter Mormon local government (and local choice) by making the saints isolated minorities in surrounding governments. However, Douglas also told the delegates that if they insisted upon presenting their petitions for statehood, they would pay a heavy price. The petitions would certainly go down before heavy majorities in both the House and Senate, and the bill to cut Utah into pieces might gain new strength. Moreover, Morrill’s anti-polygamy bill continued to be a problem, which, if enacted, threatened to put Utah in the middle of a widespread and unprecedented federal prosecution. Because of the strong winds blowing against the saints, Douglas told Taylor and Smith to be patient. If Buchanan were elected and if the Democrats gained control of Congress—and if popular sovereignty became more widely accepted—then something might be done for the Mormons.50 The “ifs” were large.

Taylor and Smith reluctantly accepted Douglas’s advice. Their decision to stand down was carried in the national press, and the Mormons went on record with the face-saving comment that “the present opposition [against them] to be only for party effect,” which might end after the election.51 But nothing that Taylor and Smith did—or did not do—appeared to help. The Mormon question had become too much a part of the campaign. In August, the New York Herald, arguably the nation’s most popular newspaper, began more articles on Utah. “Humanity shudders at the degradation, disgrace and suffering which those unhappy females are compelled to submit to,” said one article about the women in Utah. “The hard labor, the cruel treatment, and personal neglect they endure is absolutely shocking. [Moreover] the manner in which the local government is conducted, the vulgarity of the public documents, and the occasional proclamations of the Governor of this benighted Territory, afford the most complete evidence of bigotry, misrule and tyranny.”52 The newspaper made no attempt to document any of its sweeping charges.

It is not known what prompted the Herald’s fierce obloquy, although there was a group of men in Utah, opposed to Mormon rule, who during the summer had begun a letter-writing campaign to put conditions in the territory in the worst possible light. One of the most damaging letters was from “Veritas,” which appeared in the New York Tribune. While the identity of its author is unknown, a leading candidate is William W. Drummond, an

50 “Report of Taylor and Smith to the Utah Legislative Assembly,” 346-8; John Taylor to Brigham Young, July 12, 1856, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library.
51 New York Tribune, July 5, 1856.
unsteady territorial judge, who had become involved in several bitter conflicts with the saints. Drummond had recently left the main Utah settlements for the Carson Valley in present-day Nevada, where he began to write anti-Mormon dispatches as well as a legal opinion that challenged the way Mormons were using Utah's probate courts. Another of Drummond's public-press letters would appear under the like-sounding name of “Veratus.” Drummond liked Latin names. He used them when naming his children, one of whom was called "Veritas," or something like it. He had apparently chosen a pen name as sort of an insider's game to hint at his real identity.

Veritas claimed to be writing from Utah and said he possessed the most serious inside information. He suggested that the "diabolical" rituals of the Mormon endowment rivaled those of the Greeks' sensual Temple of Ceres and said the endowment bound the saints together in blood-oaths to avenge the murder of Joseph Smith. He also said that Utahns had stolen the Green River ferries from mountain men and that the church, working behind the scenes, had prevented the felony convictions during the Gunnison massacre trial. Veritas pointed out that Brigham Young was currently building a large home for his "sixty spirituals (formerly called concubines)," which meant that the American government, by paying Young's governor's salary, was subsidizing his corruption. Drummond's charges were meant to put a stop to Utah's statehood proposals and to make sure that Douglas's doctrine of "popular sovereignty" would never have a place in the territory. "Now... [Utahns] ask you to admit them [as a new state] and thus legalize their system," the letter concluded. "May I not hope the American people will pause and reflect before taking such a step—one which would dim the luster of our national greatness; which would bring with it present disgrace and future infamy—a step which time with its finger of scorn would point at as the blackest page in our history."

In addition to the incendiary, over-the-top public letters making their way east, a dozen additional letters are known to have been sent to various offices of the government, and this number probably did not represent the half of it. Several complaints had to do with the territorial post office, as territorial officers claimed that their mail was being regularly opened. Young strongly denied the charge, although copies of some letters ended up in Young's office files. Surveyor-General David H. Burr reported that

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51 MacKinnon, At Suvod’s Point, 120.
52 Communication of William MacKinnon to author, June 2012.
54 MacKinnon, At Suvod's Point, 56-60.
55 Brigham Young to Bernhisel, February 4, 1858, Young Correspondence, "I know nothing of it [opening the non-Mormon mail], "and care less," Young wrote. "Hence treat this [rumor] like thousands of other attempts to fasten upon this people guilt and crime, we pass it by unnoticed. We could not afford to keep a standing army of clerks to refute such idle tales." For letters in Young's files, see MacKinnon, At Suvod's Point, 53, 58.
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one of his men had been brutally attacked,
and a full recovery was in doubt. The beating
had “high authority,” Burr said, which
implied Young’s responsibility. Indian Agent Garland Hurt told
Washington that Young’s “boasted policy” toward the local Indians had
been “conducted at the sacrifice of the lives and property of a deluded
populace, who were groaning in poverty and distress.” Hurt also joined
the chorus accusing saints of alienating the Indians from the government,
making them Mormon vassals.

William M. F. Magraw’s letter to Franklin Pierce, written in October, was
another piece of Gentile anti-Mormonism. Magraw was a former U.S. mail
contractor and Utah surveyor, and he shared the negative feelings of many
of the territorial officers about Utah and the saints, especially after he lost
his mail contract to Utahns and a local court imposed a costly settlement
against him for a breach of contract to Mormon apostle Erastus Snow.
“There was much warmth and feeling on this occasion,” said Magraw’s
attorney after the court decision had been handed down by the Mormon
jury. Perhaps in pique and certainly because of his strong opposition to all
things that were Mormon, Magraw complained that “there is left no vestige
of law and order, no protection for life and property” in Utah, as the local

David H. Burr to Thomas A. Hendricks, August 30 and September 20, 1856, “The Utah Expedition,”
Message from the President of the United States, 35th Congress, House of Representatives, 1st Session, Ex.

Garland Hurt to George W. Manypenny, November 20, 1856, “The Utah Expedition,” Message from
the President of the United States, 35th Congress, House of Representatives, 1st Session, Ex. Doc. No. 71,
182.

Hosea Stout, On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844–1861, edited by Juanita Brooks,
2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and Utah State Historical Society, 1964), July 2, 1855,
August 5, 1856, and September 15, 1856, 2:557–8, 599, and 600.
priesthood was “as despotic, dangerous and dannable as has ever been known to exist in any country.”

Magraw claimed Mormon policy was “framed in dark corners” and “promulgated from the stand of tabernacle or church, and executed at midnight, or upon the highways, by an organized band of bravos and assassins, whose masters compel an outraged community to tolerate [it] in their midst.” This last charge had often been made against the Mormons since their days in Missouri when they were accused of having a group of men called “Danites” to kill anyone who stood in their way. While Magraw’s letter lacked proof, he nevertheless assured Polk “conservative people” would recoil once the full story became known. Then, an outraged public might bring upon Utah “bloodshed, robbery[,] and rapine” and leave the territory to become a “howling wilderness.” However, there was a solution. If Young were removed from office, hundreds of grateful citizens, he predicted, would rise up against the current church leaders. “I know that they will be at no loss for a leader.”

At the time that Magraw was writing his letter to Pierce, Isaac Hockaday, brother of Magraw’s former partner John M. Hockaday, sent one of his own to the President. Hockaday’s letter charged that the Gentiles in Utah were suffering “wrongs, abuses and outrages” and that Utah was under the control “of the most lawless set of knaves and assassins who disregard and trample under foot the rights of those not belonging to their so called religious community as well as those who are unwilling to sanction and affiliate with them in their most obscene outrages.”

The Gentile letters must have had a role in the growing consensus about the saints. By late October as the election campaign was ending, the leading newspapers of the nation were calling for drastic action. The bumptious New York Herald wanted federal troops to “exterminate the Mormons” and scorned the American government’s failure to take on the Mormons. The New York Tribune, perhaps the Republicans’ leading journalistic voice, called for “wise and firm measures” against the Mormons and their “evil.” The Tribune cited strategic reasons. The Mormons and the Indian allies controlled the transcontinental lines of travel and communication, it complained, where the national railroad was likely to be built. Even Buchanan overcame his scruples against national public works and joined the Republicans to support the project, also citing national security. California and the west coast could not be protected.

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67 Ibid.
68 Isaac Hockaday to Pierce, October 6, 1856, Miscellaneous Letters of Department of State, National Archives, as cited in Mackinnon, At Second's Point, 57.
69 New York Herald, October 19, 1856, as cited in The Mormon, October 25, 1856.
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without it, he argued. 66

“Prejudice against Utah on
account of its ‘peculiar institu-
tion’” had never been greater,
Bernhisel wrote Young. 67
George A. Smith offered to
boost Bernhisel’s flagging spirits
by having joint prayers, but
Bernhisel put him off,
apparently thinking that Smith
was trying to manage him. 68
Taylor took refuge about what
was being said against his
people in the strain of apoca-
lypticism that ran in early
Mormonism. Were not the lies
and distortions being leveled
against the saints fulfilling the
end-of-times that Joseph Smith
had often spoken of? Taylor had
in mind Smith’s prophecy about
a coming civil war. This
revelation predicted the “death and misery of
many souls” beginning in South Carolina,
probably because of the slavery. 69

“How fast the words of Joseph are hastening
to their accomplishment in regard to the
division of the North and South; and how
literal in regard to South Carolina,” Taylor pointed out. Preston Brooks, the
congressman who had thrashed Sumner, came from South Carolina, along
with other firebrands who were warning that the South would leave the
Union if Frémont won the election. “Talk about us entering the Union;
there is no Union,” Taylor said. “There is a nominal, patched up, national
growing, disunited, quarreling confederacy; but no Union. The elements
will not fuse and the different factions meet in Congress not as the
representatives of a great Nation, but as demagogues[,] as factionists, as
national enemies.” Taylor believed the nation was coming apart, everything
a “boiling cauldron,” as old political alliances were breaking down and new
ones rising. 70

66 Stamp, America in 1857, 48.
67 Bernhisel to Young, August 18, 1856, Young Correspondence.
68 George A. Smith to Young, November 12, 1856, Young Correspondence.
69 Doctrine and Covenants 87:1-2; 130:12-13.
70 John Taylor to Young, October 17, 1856, Young Correspondence.
The Mormon bid for statehood was not as simple as it seemed. On one hand, the saints wanted to be admitted to the Union, which they valued because it upheld “just and holy principles” that, according to another of Smith’s revelations, set the pattern for the “rights and protection of all flesh.” The saints believed among the great constitutional privileges was self-government. As long as Utah remained a territory and not a state, that God-given right remained very uncertain. However, while the practical Mormons were doing their best to make Utah a state, their belief in a quickly coming end-of-times kept them second-guessing. Were all their efforts to get into the Union really a waste of time?

The only weapon that the Mormons had during the election was The Mormon, which Taylor continued to edit. The newspaper called on those making charges against the Mormons to offer “the act, the time, the place, to justify their accusations.” It also tried to draw a narrow but impossible line between Utah’s desire for local government and its practice of plural marriage. “All we want is equal rights,” the newspaper said. Another editorial tried to make Utah’s polygamy a matter of humor. “Polygamy among the Mormons can never be part of... any one’s business outside of Mormonism. How can it? We don’t insist that... others should have two or more wives—there are plenty of men that never deserved one— neither do we ask... others for any jewel [of a wife] that... they may possess.” In the end, Taylor’s hope to duel with the nation’s leading newspapers went nowhere. No one was listening.

When the campaign ended, Buchanan won the presidency, and the Democrats enjoyed majorities in the new Thirty-Fifth Congress. But there was a new political landscape. Although Fillmore’s American Party received more than one in five votes cast, it had captured only one border state. It had no future. Nor had the Democrats done well in the North. Frémont had closed fast and carried all but five of the “free states.” The Republicans had every reason to feel good about their first try at national politics—and for their future. A few more northern states, and next time they would have the Executive Mansion.

During the campaign, The Mormon had praised Buchanan as an “honorable, high-minded, courteous gentleman,” but had done little else to support him. The last thing that Buchanan and the Democrats (and popular sovereignty) needed was the support of the Mormons, which was lukewarm anyway. Young privately hoped for Fillmore in 1856 and Douglas in 1860, the two national figures who had done the most to help Utah.

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70 Doctrine and Covenants 101:77, 80; see also Doctrine and Covenants 98:5-7.
71 “Ex-Gov. Reeder on Gov. Young and Utah,” The Mormon, August 30, 1856.
72 “Boys, Don’t Disturb the Bee Hive,” The Mormon June 1854.
73 Stampy. America in 1857, 6, 37.
74 “Mr. Buchanan,” The Mormon, June 14, 1856.
75 Brigham Young to John M. Bernhisel, July 17, 1856, Young Correspondence.
But Young was too much a realist, or millenarian, to be optimistic. When Buchanan was elected, he had the satisfaction that the nationally-minded, anti-polygamy Republicans had been kept out of office. But there was no jubilation. Bernhisel, writing from Washington, warned not to expect any favors.  

The Mormons hoped that once the ballots were counted things might calm down. But the Saints were too good newspaper copy, and once the moral flame about polygamy and theocracy had been lit, it was hard to extinguish. Something had to be done about Utah, clamored the New York Sun, two weeks after the polls closed, and the newspaper wanted the work to start with the next session of Congress. A "libidinous priesthood" was demoralizing and enslaving women, while government in Utah was more absolute than even Mahomet's rule. The Sun even made the remarkable claim the Mormons posed the greatest threat facing American republicanism, ignoring for the moment the problems with race and section.  

The billingsgate was not limited to the New York dailies. Democrats in the South and Upper South, realizing the damage done by polygamy to their popular sovereignty and to their party, tried to rid themselves of any vexing Mormon tie. "The abominations of polygamy, and the outrages of theocratic despotism, cannot shelter themselves under the panoply of Squatter Sovereignty," said the Richmond Enquirer, casting aside the South's usual constitutional views. By the end of the year, Apostle Taylor, still editing The Mormon in New York City, was beside himself. "There does seem ... to be gaining ground a deep[,] settled prejudice against Utah and her interests," he wrote to Young. "Some of our papers here have hinted at [our] extermination &c. A general feeling of hatred is being engendered."  

There was still the unfinished business of Utah's statehood petitions. In January 1857, Bernhisel, Smith, and Taylor were back in Senator Douglas's office asking for more advice. Douglas was even more outspoken. Any move to request statehood—the slightest tremor—might bring from Congress "hostile action," Douglas gravely warned. The startled Mormons wanted to know what Douglas was actually saying. While Douglas refused to give any details, his reply had alarming ambiguity and emphasis. If the Mormons insisted on going before Congress, they should expect a reaction "of the most hostile character."  

"All our friends if we have any deserving the appellation have been of [the] opinion nothing could be effected and that an attempt would be certain defeat and injurious," Taylor tried to explain to Young. Taylor said

77 George A. Smith to Young, November 12, 1856, and Bernhisel to Young, November 19, 1856, Young Correspondence.  
78 New York Sun, November 18, 1856, in Historian's Office Historical Scrapbooks, 1840-1940, box 1, fl. 4, book 4, p. 78.  
79 As cited in The Mormon, December 13, 1856.  
80 John Taylor to Brigham Young, December 20, 1856, Young Correspondence.  
81 "Report of Taylor and Smith to the Utah Legislative Assembly," 348. Emphasis in the original.
that Greeley at the *New York Tribune* continued his “deadly hostility” by publishing the anonymous letters from Utah. The church could not have “a more virulent, bitter, and unscrupulous enemy” than Greeley, Taylor thought. But editor James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* was only a step or two behind, if that.

The Mormons began to think that there might be some kind of a plot against them—as almost certainly there was. Some of the letters and articles appeared to be a part of an organized attempt to overthrow the Mormon regime and seemed to come from a small group of long-standing opponents in Utah. These conspirators included territorial officers, men seeking or holding Federal contracts, and Gentile merchants in Salt Lake City. Young had already sent a list of more than two dozen names of possible church enemies to see if Taylor could find anything out about their work. An unnamed source had given this information to Young, and Young admitted that he was uncertain about its accuracy. But according to Young’s source, these opponents were preparing anti-statehood affidavits and making lists of plural wives of Mormon leaders. The idea was to embarrass the Mormons at every turn. In early 1857 at least three national journals carried statistical surveys of the plural wives of Mormon leaders, just as predicted.

Taylor responded to Young’s rumors with some of his own. During recent weeks, he had heard of “certain indications and expressions” of dark plots, Taylor wrote back to Salt Lake City. Enemies in Utah might be working to bring “a new dynasty” to the church and possibly even working to destroy or kill the Mormon leaders, he told Young, although he could learn nothing for certain. Taylor’s findings agreed with some of the passages of Magraw’s letter to Pierce, which had spoken of a possible coup. The apostle’s startling report was written in a matter-of-fact letter to Young. Its even tenor showed how much the Mormons had come to expect violation and hardship. After receiving Taylor’s letter—and perhaps before—Young withdrew from public view for several months. While perhaps Young’s absence was due to poor health, it is also possible he took the threats against his life seriously.

The election of 1856 and the conduct of the territorial officers left Young despairing, and in January 1857 the Utah legislature drafted strongly worded memorials asserting its “right to have a voice in the selection of our rulers.” The “right” apparently included taking action against the

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41 John Taylor to Brigham Young, December 20, 1856, Young Correspondence.
42 *The Mormon* replied to these and other articles, November 15 and 29, December 6, 13, and 20, 1856, and January 3, 10, 17, and 24, 1857.
43 Brigham Young to George A. Smith, July 30, 1856, Young Correspondence.
44 Brigham Young to John M. Bernhisel, July 17, 1856, Young Correspondence.
46 John Taylor to Brigham Young, December 20, 1856, Young Correspondence.
47 Memorial, Executive Files, Governor’s Office Files, Young Office Files, Church History Library.
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officers still in the territory as well as those who might come in their place. "Why not kick them out of the Territory[,] say You," Young rhetorically wrote to his friend Thomas L. Kane about the men who had been so busy with their conspiratorial letter-writing. "That's just it, we intend to, the very first opportunity. We are resolved that their United States' official dignity shall no longer screen them." Young also told Smith and Bernhisel that any new batch of unfit federal appointees would be turned out "as fast as they come let the consequences be what they may." The saints were "determined to claim the right of having a voice in the selection of our officers, he said, and if the politicians in Washington were unwilling to listen, Young wanted the memorials of the Utah legislature published in the national press." While historians have recently argued that these petitions and Young's anger were keys to precipitating the Utah War, a great deal lay behind both.

Much had changed in 1856. While the year had begun with the Mormons hoping that Utah might gain statehood and become an equal partner in the Union, these plans were in ruins twelve months later. An American public had found deeper fathoms of mistrust and objection against the Mormons. A new national political alignment had taken hold that involved a surging and moralistic Republican Party, anxious to end old constitutional theories about local decision-making in the west. As it turned out, while Representative Justin S. Morrill did not have the votes to pass his anti-polygamy bill, he did persuade the House in January 1857 to pass a resolution requesting the President to tell Congress whether "any resistance, organized or otherwise, has been made, or is to be apprehended, against the official action or administration of the United States territorial officials in the Territory of Utah." Outgoing Franklin Pierce quietly pocketed the request. This was one dangerous baton best passed on to a successor.

There is no way of knowing what Buchanan thought of the Mormons as he made his way to the Lancaster railroad station in February 1857. He did not keep a diary, and his letters were as circumspect as usual, which left close friends and later historians guessing. Of course, he knew of the Republican success with the "relics" of barbarism, and he knew what the newspapers were saying about the Mormons—and he may have known something about the reports that had come to the Pierce Administration. Buchanan went to great pains to keep himself informed, and he had a wide network of friends inside and outside of the government. He must have felt an obligation to preserve the Democratic Party as well as the Union, and

89 Brigham Young to Thomas L. Kane, January 7, 1857, Letterbook C, Young Office Files, Church History Library.
90 Brigham Young to George A. Smith and John M. Bernhisel, January 3, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 3:259, Young Office Files, Church History Library.
for him the two objectives went hand-in-hand. As a “dough-faced Democrat”—a northerner with sympathy for the South—he knew that he had to take action to prevent the Republicans from exploiting the Mormon issue further.

These political pressures posed a dilemma. On one hand, the Democratic Party was still officially committed to popular sovereignty, but Buchanan was having private second thoughts. An early draft of Buchanan’s inaugural speech suggested the citizens of Kansas and Nebraska didn’t have power to make a decision over slavery until a state constitution was proposed, which, if adopted, would have gutted the doctrine. When Lewis Cass, soon-to-become Buchanan’s Secretary of State, learned of these words he was furious. Cass, one the first and strongest squatter rights boosters in the country, threatened to withdraw from the new cabinet. Buchanan quickly retreated. The right to local decision-making was “sacred,” he said when actually giving his speech, “as ancient as free government itself.” Nothing could be “fairer” than to let the people of a territory “to decide their own destiny for themselves, subject only to the Constitution of the United States,” he said.93

As Buchanan now became responsible for making the government’s public decisions regarding Utah, he had to choose between this constitutional ideal—the view of the nation’s dominant political party—or respond to the rising calls being made upon him to take action against the saints. In the end, he chose an expedient path and no doubt what he felt to be the necessary one. One reason why he abandoned popular sovereignty and sent an army to Utah was the election of 1856. In the end, the Utah War had another nagging inconsistency. Many of the soldiers and government officers sent to Utah in 1857–58, who were so outspoken about the saints being traitors and successionists, would in a few short years, carry the colors of the Confederacy’s Stars and Bars.

93 Moore, The Works of James Buchanan, 10: 106-8fn.; also see Klein, President James Buchanan, 271-2.