

Lessons We Can Learn from the Mountain Meadows Massacre

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The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 has been called the worst incident in Utah, Latter-day Saint, and northwest Arkansas history. I don't remember the first time I heard about it, but I coauthored my first publication about the atrocity more than thirty years ago, an article on the subject published in a multivolume encyclopedia set issued by Macmillan Publishing Company of New York in 1992.¹

Over the ensuing decades, I have coauthored two narrative volumes about the massacre, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*² and *Vengeance Is Mine*,³ as well as three documentary volumes, two containing legal papers and the other the documents that historian Juanita Brooks tried to get for her 1950 book on the massacre but could not.⁴ In addition,

1. Ronald K. Esplin and Richard E. Turley Jr., "Mountain Meadows Massacre," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:966–68.

2. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3. Richard E. Turley Jr. and Barbara Jones Brown, *Vengeance Is Mine: The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

4. Richard E. Turley Jr., Janiece L. Johnson, and LaJean Purcell Carruth, *Mountain Meadows Massacre: Collected Legal Papers, Volume 1: Initial Investigations and Indictments* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Richard E. Turley Jr., Janiece L.

I have helped produce the mountainmeadowsmassacre.org website containing thousands of pages of useful information on the atrocity.

So what have I learned from studying this terrible topic for much of my professional life as a historian? Today, I would like to mention seven lessons: (1) avoid fanaticism, (2) don't overreact to rumors, (3) don't give in to peer pressure, (4) find safety in councils, (5) don't try to cover up wrongdoing, (6) deal with hard topics honestly, and (7) love your enemies.

Avoid Fanaticism

Lesson number one: the Mountain Meadows Massacre teaches us to avoid fanaticism. In unsettled times, it is easy for people to become upset, to get emotional, and to gravitate toward attitudes and behaviors that at calmer times would be seen as fanatical. Perhaps that is why mass killings carried out by groups of individuals tend to occur in times of war or other major disruptions. Studying the massacre teaches us that in unsettled times, we should maintain our poise and not be caught up in what people in 1857 called "the spirit of the times."⁵ Had the citizens of southern Utah remained calm and avoided fanaticism, the massacre would not have occurred.

The same lesson applies to us if we hold leadership positions. In retrospect, we can see that the strong rhetoric and military resistance strategies of the times had negative unintended consequences. When people look to us for leadership, we need to recognize that when we sneeze, people might catch pneumonia.

Wilford Woodruff, a Latter-day Saint Apostle at the time and later Church President, reflected on the strong language of the so-called Reformation of 1855–57 that provided the background for the massacre. He concluded it had gone too far, even among leaders. As Thomas Alexander points out in an article on Wilford Woodruff and the Reformation, "Woodruff . . . exhorted priesthood leaders to deal with the Saints in 'the spirit of God.' They did not, he said, need to 'knock the people in the Head in order to wake them.'"⁶ As Barbara Jones Brown and I note in *Vengeance*

Johnson, and LaJean Purcell Carruth, *Mountain Meadows Massacre: Collected Legal Papers, Volume 2: Selected Trial Records and Aftermath* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Richard E. Turley Jr. and Ronald W. Walker, *Mountain Meadows Massacre: The Andrew Jenson and David H. Morris Collections* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009).

5. Turley and Brown, *Vengeance Is Mine*, 50, 77, 139.

6. Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation of 1855–57," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 31.

Is Mine, Wilford Woodruff told John Hawley “he was satisfied that some of our brethren had gone farther with this reformation and vengeance than they ought.”⁷

This lesson is relevant to us today. We live in unsettled times, made more emotional by the rhetoric used in cable television broadcasts, partisan political advertisements, and unbridled social media. The result is a polarization of society. In calm times, the majority of people tend to gravitate toward the moderate middle in their attitudes and behaviors. Portrayed on a graph, the distribution would resemble the familiar bell curve, with most people in the middle half and only a small portion at the outer fringes.

During unsettled times, more and more people gravitate to the fringes, setting up battles between those on opposite ends of the spectrum. Surveys conducted in recent years have shown that an increasing number of people want to battle those on the opposite side of this spectrum, even to the point of physical violence.⁸ That is the consequence of polarizing fanaticism. The Mountain Meadows Massacre and its context teach us to avoid it.

Don't Overreact to Rumors

Lesson number two: don't overreact to rumors. In unsettled times, rumors abound. Some of these rumors may be true, and some may not be. Reacting immediately to a rumor without waiting a sufficient time to determine its truth or falsity may cause us to say or do things we would later regret. Historians of violence point out that mass murders often happen in reaction to false rumors that motivate people to do what under ordinary circumstances they would not.⁹

False rumors have led to extralegal violence again and again throughout history. Often these crimes are followed by additional false rumors that people grasp in a vain effort to justify their wrongful violence. This was certainly the case with the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Rumors generated before and after the crime have been tenaciously believed to

7. Turley and Brown, *Vengeance Is Mine*, 50.

8. Matthew Brown, “Support for Political Violence Depends on Specifics, Study Shows,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2023; Rachel Kleinfeld, “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (October 2021), 160–76; States United Democracy Center, “Americans’ Views on Political Violence—Key Findings & Recommendations,” June 15, 2023, <https://statesuniteddemocracy.org/resources/americans-views-political-violence>.

9. See sources cited in Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, xiii–xiv, 281–82.

this day to justify the evil that was the massacre, to wrongly condone the crime, or to try to rehabilitate the reputation of people who participated in it.

No one alive today is responsible for the massacre. But we are all responsible for how we deal with it. If we seek to deny, condone, or justify what is, in reality, entirely unjustifiable, we become guilty of perpetuating a historical cover-up and are party to accepting the murder of many innocent people. We should not overreact to rumors or continue to hold on to them after time—the great tester—has proved them to be false.

As my coauthors and I wrote in *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, “The emigrants did not deserve what eventually happened to them at Mountain Meadows. The massacre was not inevitable. No easy absolution for the perpetrators is possible. Their later posturing and rationalization could never overcome one irrefutable fact: All the purported wrongs of the emigrants—even if true—did not justify the killing of a single person. The best that could be argued was that during a time of uncertainty and possible war, some of the [Latter-day Saints], like other men and women throughout history, did not match their behavior with their ideals.”¹⁰

Don't Give In to Peer Pressure

Lesson number three: don't give in to peer pressure. Mass killings carried out by groups of people, as in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, are the result of a mob mentality generated by fanaticism. That mob mentality is extremely contagious and can be hard to resist. The literature on the history of violence explains what happens when the mob mentality kicks in. Someone suggests that members of a group do something terribly wrong. There may be several people in the group who don't think the idea is a good one. But they look around and don't see anyone objecting. If no one's objecting, they might rationalize, then maybe this bad idea really is a good one after all.

Resisting peer pressure by speaking up against bad ideas is one way to help stop extralegal violence. If just one person were to speak up and express disagreement, the others who disagree but did not have the courage to object might then speak up also. Sadly, in the case of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, none of the dozens of men on the ground at the time appears to have spoken up against the deadly plan.

10. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 115.

Does this lesson apply today? Of course it does. With the polarization of society we see all around us, the efforts of many people to dehumanize or demonize those who don't agree with them personally, and an increased willingness reflected in polls to use physical violence against others, there are many opportunities for people to speak up and recommend patience, tolerance, kindness, and civility.

There Is Safety in Councils

Lesson number four: there is safety in councils. In the Bible, the book of Proverbs, chapter 11, verse 14, we read that “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.” The history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre shows us councils making the right decisions and upset individuals making the wrong ones.

On Saturday, September 5, 1857, when Isaac Haight tasked John D. Lee to make the initial attack on the emigrant train, “Lee said he asked Haight if it wouldn't ‘be well to hold a council of the brethren before making a move.’ Haight replied, ‘We can't now delay for a council of the brethren.’ He [promised that he] would bring the matter before a council [the next day] on Sunday.” With that, he sent Lee off to make the initial attack on the emigrants.¹¹

When Haight convened a council the next day as promised, rumors about the emigrants' supposed ill behavior were used by what Elias Morris called “the more radical members present” to justify “harsh measures,” including an attack on the train.¹² Remember lesson one about avoiding fanaticism, lesson two about not overreacting to rumors, and lesson three about not giving in to peer pressure but instead speaking out against violence. One of the men in the Cedar City council, Laban Morrill, had the courage to speak up against the fanaticism.

“Do not our principles of right teach us to return good for evil and do good to those who despitefully use us?” he later remembered countering [quoting Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:44)].” Morrill objected to the plan to attack the emigrants. When he spoke up, others in the council joined him in opposing the fanatical attitudes. “The debate continued until Morrill finally got the men to agree ‘that all should keep still [and] quiet and that there should be a dispatch to Governor Young to know what would be the best course.’”¹³

11. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 145.

12. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 155.

13. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 156.

Brigham Young responded with a letter directing that the settlers “not meddle” with the emigrants. “There are no other trains going south that I know of,” Young replied. “If those who are there will leave let them go in peace. While we should be alert, on hand and always ready[,] we should also possess ourselves in patience.”¹⁴

Responding to his council’s decision, and before writing to Brigham Young, Haight sent two men out to call off John D. Lee. Sadly, Lee led an attack on the wagon train early Monday morning before the couriers reached him, and emigrants died in that initial attack. When the couriers discovered they had not reached Lee in time, they shot at two emigrants who had gone back to collect stray cattle and were unaware of the attack. One died, and the other rushed forward to join his besieged wagon train members. Had Haight sought advice from his council in Cedar City before dispatching Lee to attack the train, the massacre would never have occurred.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre also furnishes us another example of when the advice of a council was better than the decisions of excited individuals. Late Wednesday evening, September 9, 1857, Isaac Haight and Elias Morris reached the Parowan home of William Dame, their military superior. Dame called a midnight council to discuss the recent attack by Lee and others on the emigrant train. After some discussion, it was proposed “that a company should be sent out from Parowan . . . to . . . gather up the stock of the company, and let them continue their journey in peace.” The council agreed.¹⁵

This was good counsel and should have been followed. “Haight later admitted to Barton, ‘I would give a world if I had it, if we had abided by the deci[s]ion of the council.’”¹⁶ But he did not. And why not?

Don’t Try to Cover Up Wrongdoing

That brings us to lesson number five: don’t try to cover up wrongdoing with more wrongdoing. In some ways, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was a cover-up from beginning to end. Had Haight and the others followed the advice of the Parowan council, the casualties would have been limited to those that had already occurred. But Haight had done wrong in dispatching Lee to make the attack, and Lee and those with him had done wrong in inflicting casualties on the innocent emigrants. Haight wanted to cover up all those wrongs.

14. Turley and Brown, *Vengeance Is Mine*, 42.

15. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 177–78.

16. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 178.

Joseph Smith, the founding leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sent a letter in March 1839 while incarcerated in Liberty, Missouri. Since 1876, portions of the letter have been part of Latter-day Saint scripture as Doctrine and Covenants sections 121 to 123. Referring, I believe, to the Danite excesses of the previous year, Joseph Smith lamented in the letter, “When we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; [and] the Spirit of the Lord is grieved” (D&C 121:37).

Rather than abide by the decision of the Parowan council, Haight pulled Dame aside afterward and rationalized that they should instead wipe out the rest of the company to keep them from going to California and reporting the crime.¹⁷ Dame acceded to Haight’s request and authorized him to muster out members of the local territorial militia, send them to the Mountain Meadows, and wipe out the survivors of the initial attacks. They did so, killing all but seventeen children considered too young to tell the tale.

In other words, those who did wrong wanted to cover their wrongdoing with more wrongdoing. Had it not been for that, the final blood-bath on September 11, 1857, would never have occurred.

Deal with Hard Topics Honestly

Lesson number six: deal with hard topics honestly. As much as we wish the Mountain Meadows Massacre had never happened, it did. When I first began studying the topic, it was taboo in many corners of southern Utah. When people did talk with me about it, they sometimes did so in hushed tones after looking both ways first to be sure they were not being overheard.

But remember this: the truth will out. Efforts to cover up wrongdoing are wrong themselves. We cannot deny the massacre happened. We cannot condone it because it is unjustifiable. My coauthors and I have heard and carefully investigated all the arguments used over the years to justify the killing, and none of them comes close to excusing it.

Just one example. John D. Lee and others claimed that the massacred emigrants had deliberately poisoned a spring, killing cattle, local settlers, and Native people. Because this was a theory we could test using scientific means, my colleagues and I gathered all the descriptions of the

17. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 178–79.

so-called poisoning we could find and presented them as a case study to a panel of distinguished physicians. Their conclusion: the symptoms were most likely caused by naturally occurring anthrax tracked along the trail by the cattle companies of 1857 and previous years. No one poisoned anyone. Those who died or became sick did so because of natural causes, not anyone's ill intent.

We even went so far as to dig up a body. We knew that fourteen-year-old Proctor Robison, a local settler, had died after skinning one of the cattle that died, and that his death was attributed to emigrant poison. Proctor touched a sore on his nose, which then swelled up until he was unrecognizable before his horrible death. Was that poisoning? We decided to test our theory about anthrax, which can remain in the soil for hundreds of years. We knew where Proctor was buried in the Fillmore cemetery. I had a friend who was expert in doing the legal work to exhume bodies, and we filed the necessary papers and got a laboratory in Arizona to examine samples once Proctor was dug up.

But we needed the permission of the Robison family since Proctor did not live long enough to have his own descendants. One of the leaders of the Robison family in Utah was longtime Brigham Young University track coach Clarence Robison, a former Olympian. Clarence had passed away, but I phoned his widow, my cousin Monita Turley Robison, and got the family's permission. We did not find anthrax spores, but Proctor's death fits perfectly with the symptoms of cutaneous anthrax.¹⁸

Love Your Enemies

Lesson number seven: love your enemies. This is a lesson in not demonizing others, even if you think they have wronged you.

To return to the verse from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount referenced by Laban Morrill, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

In 1859, U.S. Army soldiers gathered up the scattered bones of the Mountain Meadows Massacre victims and buried them under a cairn topped by a cedar cross. On that cross, they carved words from the New Testament: "Vengeance is mine: I will repay saith the Lord."

18. Ugo A. Perego and others, "The Mountain Meadows Massacre and 'Poisoned Springs': Scientific Testing of the More Recent, Anthrax Theory," *International Journal of Legal Medicine* 127, no. 1 (2013): 77-83; Michael De Groote, "DNA, Anthrax, and a Mountain Meadows Massacre Murder Mystery," *Deseret News*, March 22, 2012.

Let me read this passage in its New Testament context: “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: . . . Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19–21).

In this polarized age in which we live—an age in which we are tempted toward fanaticism, to brand others in ways that dehumanize, vilify, or demonize them, and to attack them verbally or physically—the Mountain Meadows Massacre teaches us to follow the Savior’s admonition to love people instead.

Conclusion

No one alive today is responsible for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. But we are all responsible for how we deal with it, including learning from the lessons it teaches. Let us never deny or condone the massacre or try to excuse those who took part. Rather, let us resolve to (1) avoid fanaticism, (2) not overreact to rumors, (3) not give in to peer pressure, (4) find safety in councils, (5) not try to cover up wrongdoing, (6) deal with hard topics honestly, and (7) love anyone we might be tempted to view as an enemy.

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