

BRIGHAM YOUNG ON POLITICS AND PRIESTHOOD

J. Keith Melville

The drama begins in 1848, a presidential election year in America. It unfolds in three major centers: Kanesville in western Iowa, Great Salt Lake City in Upper California, and Washington D.C. The star performers are elders and politicians.

The first scene of Act One opens in Kanesville in March where the Mormon vote is solicited by representatives of the Whig Political party of Iowa. Similar overtures are made by the Democratic party. The Mormons are aware of their political power as a similar scene had been played once before—in Illinois! The Mormon leaders call a political caucus and decide to support the Whig ticket; the Whigs agree to help the Mormons in their migration to their new home in the Great Basin.

The next scene takes place in August at the polls in Kanesville, where 491 Whig ballots are cast for state and congressional candidates out of a total of 523. A chain of bizarre events follow. The Kanesville pollbooks are "lost" after they are delivered to the Monroe County clerk, which leaves the election of the first congressional candidate in doubt, which prompts Daniel Miller to challenge William Thompson's right to sit in Congress, which touches off a bitter partisan conflict in the House of Representatives, which results in a tie vote to be broken by the Speaker of the House, which initiates more parliamentary maneuvers to be ended only after the House declares the seat vacant! A special election follows in which Daniel Miller is elected to Congress again with the help of the Mormon vote, but this all takes place after the regular election in 1850 wherein Miller's successor has already been elected.¹

The third scene of this political drama is one in which the principals are all Mormons. Orson Hyde, who is one of the Twelve Apostles of the Church and the presiding officer over the Saints in Iowa, is the prime promoter of the Whig cause

¹More detailed accounts of this interesting political history are found in J. Keith Melville, *Highlights in Mormon Political History*, Charles E. Merrill Monograph Series, No. 2, May, 1967.

among the Mormons. Almon W. Babbitt, a Seventy in the Church and trustee for the disposal of Church property in Illinois, is a Democrat and opposed to Hyde's political activity. The partisan controversy between Hyde and Babbitt builds to a caustic climax when Babbitt charges Hyde with prostrating sacred human rights at the "shrine of religious despots." For this reason, Babbitt is disfellowshipped at a conference of the Seventies in the Log Tabernacle on November 19, 1848.

Act Two takes place in the Great Salt Lake Valley in the spring and summer of 1849. Almon W. Babbitt takes his case to Brigham Young, who restores him to his former position in the Church. Babbitt is elected as the delegate of the State of Deseret to go to Washington to assist Dr. John N. Bernhisel, the Mormon lobbyist at Washington, in obtaining one great objective—the admission of Deseret into the Union as a "sovereign state."

The political strategy of Brigham Young is to use as much political influence as possible and he believes that Babbitt has political influence among the Democrats. Bernhisel and Hyde are to work with President Zachary Taylor and the Whigs. In addition, Thomas L. Kane, a friend of the Mormons, and Oliver Cowdery, who recently returned to the Church, are urged to assist in the Mormon political objective. In this bi-partisan strategy the First Presidency of the Church wants Orson Hyde to clearly understand the proper relationship of politics to the Priesthood:

Great Salt Lake City, July 20, 1849

Dear Brother Hyde: We learn that you have disfellowshipped Brother Babbitt, also that you have come to the wise conclusion to quit eating each other up. Now we do not care about your political differences, but wish to say confidentially to you, keep them up, outwardly for that may be good policy. But let it be distinctly understood between you and him as good brethren, that you are seeking to accomplish the same grand object namely admission into the Union as a free, and Independent State. Do not permit (trivial) matters to influence you in the least; and never, no never! no never!! again drag Priesthood into a Political gentile warfare.

Letters are also written to Oliver Cowdery, Wilford Woodruff, Thomas L. Kane and others to all unite and work for

the admission of Deseret into the Union. Two letters to Brothers Farnham and Nathaniel H. Felt at St. Louis are especially poignant.

July 24, 1849

Dear Brother Farnham: We have communications, papers, etc., from which we learn (much to our regret) of certain differences, dissensions, strifes, etc., in the branch in St. Louis. These things should not be. Especially in regard to political controversies. The Priesthood should never be dishonored by bringing to bear any of the power thereof in a mere Gentile political question. If there is not merit enough to furnish sufficient argument to sustain themselves let them fall. . . .

July 24, 1849

Dear Brother Felt: It is earnestly desired that all difficulties originating in political differences should be buried in eternal oblivion; never permit Gentile political warfare to enter into your private circles, to cause distrust, engender strife and division in your midst. Never, no, never disgrace the Holy and eternal priesthood of Almighty God by using or exerting that influence and power to further any such purposes, let them stand or fall by their own intrinsic merits.²

The final act unfolds in Washington, D.C., where the admission of Deseret becomes secondary to the more pressing issue of slavery. The grand design for Deseret is compromised. The territory of Utah is created out of a portion of Deseret, Brigham Young is appointed the first governor, and the ground work for a half-century of Federal-Mormon conflict is laid.

Epilogue: Mormon elders who dabble in politics should never forget the sage advice from the First Presidency.

²Letters on file in the Church Historian's Office.