

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

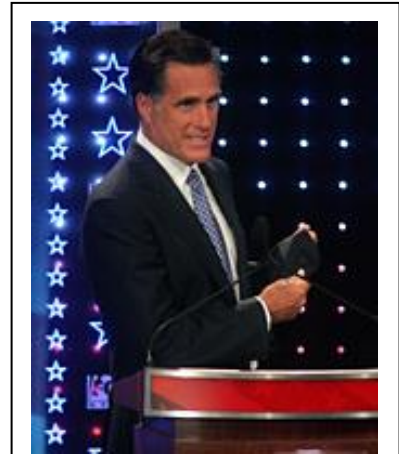
## Awakening Ghosts of the Past

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It was September 11, a crystal-clear morning with the first hint of autumn, as though a cynical, mocking God had set the stage for what would be the worst act of religiously inspired terrorism in US history.

But we are not talking about New York or Washington DC in 2001. The setting was the uplands of remote southeastern Utah, exactly 150 years ago, in a corner of an American West that was still a violent work-in-progress.

Within minutes, some 140 pioneers—a wagon-train of men, women and children headed for California—lay dead in a massacre that would not be surpassed until the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995.



The release of 'September Dawn' may harm Mormon Mitt Romney's chances of making it into the White House. Photo / Reuters

For decades, the Mountain Meadows Massacre has lain relatively undisturbed at the margins of the national consciousness. But it is about to be projected centre-stage. Next month, *September Dawn*, a new film by writer and director Christopher Cain that purports to recount at last the true story of that dreadful day, will be released in the US.

And America will be revisiting this most shameful act in the annals of the Mormon Church as, for the first time, a candidate from a faith still best known for its long-abandoned cult of polygamy has a serious shot at the presidency.

Mitt Romney is not the first Mormon to have made a bid for the White House. Mo Udall, a quixotic Arizona congressman, tried in 1976, and eight years earlier, a promising campaign by the former Michigan governor George Romney—Mitt's father—self-destructed when he let slip that he had been “brainwashed” by the military into supporting Vietnam. Right now, however, Romney Jr would appear to have a better chance than either.

Along with Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain, he is a “top-tier” candidate with a potent fundraising machine; strong organisations in the key early caucus and primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire, and a glittering resume as businessman, saviour of the

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scandal-threatened 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, and, most lately, a generally successful governor of Democratic Massachusetts.

But all Romney's carefully crafted positions on immigration, abortion and the rest risk being overwhelmed by this revisiting of his religion's past.

For those concerned with the image of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the past 12 months have been trying. Last August, Warren Jeffs, the leader of a fundamentalist polygamist sect that long ago broke from mainstream Mormonism, was arrested on charges of coercing young girls to marry older men—supporting FBI estimates that between 20,000 and 40,000 Americans still indulge in polygamy, even though the practice is both illegal and was banned by the Mormon Church in 1890.



Mormon Warren Jeffs, arrested on charges of coercing young girls to marry older men.

On a lighter note, cable TV viewers have been treated to a hit sitcom *Big Love*, about a stressed-out husband-of-three from Salt Lake City, owner of a chain of DIY stores, who juggles three homes, three mortgages and three sets of children. It is returning for a new series this summer, just as *September Dawn* hits the screens.

Those with an interest in the facts, and in the cultural and social background of Mitt Romney, have just been treated to a two-part, four-hour documentary on public television called *The Mormons*. The programmes were scrupulously even-handed, intended, in the words of their producer, to “blow away” old prejudices. But whatever stereotypes were destroyed on the small screen, they are likely to be revived on the large one by *September Dawn*.

“I am the voice of God: anyone who does not like it will be hewn down,” thunders the sonorous voiceover, which cinema buffs will quickly recognise as belonging to Terence Stamp. Stamp plays Brigham Young, the second president of the Mormon Church, and among the most riveting and controversial figures in American religion.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the film portrays the man hailed as an “American Moses”, as a bigoted, bloodthirsty maniac who maintained that non-believers deserved death. In short, an Osama bin Laden of his age, breathing fire and brimstone against the US government of the day from within his country's own borders.

By any standards Young was an epic figure. He converted to Mormonism when he was 31. Quickly, he rose and finally became the church's second president. In 1847 and 1848,

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he led his followers to the virgin lands of Utah, and proclaimed himself the territory's first governor. He supervised the building of Salt Lake City and founded universities.

He also found time to have 20 wives, by whom he sired more than 50 children. With a piercing gaze and prodigious force of personality, his authority was unchallenged.

Thanks, in good measure, to the foundations laid by Young, the modern Mormons are thriving, the most successful of the indigenous sects that emerged in the US in the 19th century. The church's 5.8 million US members are mainly concentrated in Utah and its neighbouring states. Their number includes not just Romney, but Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader and one of the two most powerful Democrats in the land, as well as influential Republican Senator Orrin Hatch.

Mormons are Christians who believe in the Old and New Testaments. But their adherence to the Book of Mormon, a sacred text of debated origin, and their recognition of modern prophets as well as ancient ones—not to mention the practice of polygamy—had many Americans of the day regard them as an immoral cult. To some they remain precisely that, and *September Dawn* is unlikely to ease such misgivings.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre has long been a source of controversy but the basic facts are not in dispute. The pioneers had set out from Arkansas on their way to California when their wagon-train was attacked on September 8, 1857. Their assailants were either local Paiute Indians, who had been mobilised by the Mormons, or Mormons disguised as Paiute. The pioneers initially managed to repel the attack. But after four days of resistance, they were so short of ammunition and water that they had no option but to sue for a truce.

A Mormon representative negotiated a deal for them to hand over their possessions in return for their safety. The men were separated and escorted away in single file, each with a Mormon militiaman guard. Suddenly, a cry rang out: "Do your duty!" Each Mormon shot the prisoner next to him. The women and children travelling ahead were butchered in their turn; only the youngest, those under 10, were spared and sent to live with Mormon families before they were finally returned to relatives in Arkansas.

In the end, the only person punished was John Lee, the adopted son of Brigham Young, who, in 1877, was executed for the crime. Cain says that his film is based on Lee's confession. But before his death, Lee insisted that he was merely a scapegoat, sacrificed to save his master. And, to this day, direct descendants of those who survived contend that Young knew about and even ordered the massacre.

*September Dawn* is unequivocal: Young was behind the whole thing.

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A remote 19th century atrocity has become a parable for 9/11 —and the actor Jon Voight, who plays a Mormon bishop in *September Dawn*, makes no bones about it. Voight is an unabashed conservative in mostly liberal Hollywood. But, he insists, the film “is a true documented event of a group of fanatic religious believers who received one man’s evil permission to massacre another religion”. The US and the West are now facing a comparable problem, he argues, “with Islamic fanatics calling for the destruction of America and all of democracy. There’s always a face of evil putting on a mask of godlike beliefs to destroy true believers in innocence and good.”



But was the Mountain Meadows Massacre really an instance of vengeful religious fanaticism? Could it not have been a dreadful overreaction to a perceived political threat, or a brutal cover-up of an act of looting—or, just possibly, a mistake? This last is the official Mormon version. Young, the church insists, did try to stop the massacre, and sent a rider to order his followers to allow the wagon-train to continue. But, by the time the messenger arrived, the slaughter had taken place.

The truth will never be known. Young’s religious convictions were certainly of a rare intensity, but the massacre must be set in the circumstances of the time. In 1857, the Mormons had every reason to feel threatened by the federal government. James Buchanan had entered the White House earlier that year, vowing to stamp out the “barbaric relic” of polygamy and sent a new governor to Utah, to break Young’s theocratic rule.

The Mormons may have suspected that the wagon-train pioneers were invaders sent by the government. Indeed, the following year, Buchanan sent 2500 troops to bring Utah to order.

The third theory has it that the real prize in those hard-pressed times, was the \$300,000-worth of possessions and goods that the settlers were carrying.

So, what will be the impact on Romney’s campaign? After all, the evils of segregation and slavery didn’t stop Southerners Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton from winning the White House.

Romney conforms to none of the Mormon stereotypes. Despite his telegenic looks and executive style, he is a pedestrian speaker. The suspicions about him have nothing to do with polygamy: unlike Giuliani and McCain, on their third and second wives respectively, the 60-year-old Romney married his high-school sweetheart Ann in 1968, and remains happily married today.

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But public doubts about Mormonism persist. John Kennedy overcame similar doubts 47 years ago, when America's first Catholic president had to convince voters that he was not an agent of the papacy—and, in a recent *Boston Globe* poll that showed Romney ahead in New Hampshire, 86 per cent of respondents said that his religion made no difference. But New Hampshire voters are a quirky bunch, who pride themselves on their objectivity.

Elsewhere, it may not be so straightforward, especially given many voters' reluctance to admit prejudices to pollsters.

A *Washington Post/ABC* poll in February found that only 29 per cent of people would be less likely to vote for a candidate because he or she was a Mormon, down from 35 per cent a few months before. But white evangelical Protestants are cooler: 38 per cent of them indicated they would not vote for a Mormon. This reluctance could matter in important early primary states such as South Carolina, where Christian conservatives play a prominent role. Right now, a majority of voters probably have no idea that Romney even is a Mormon. But pleading ignorance will be that much harder when *September Dawn* hits the screens next month, with its tale of a September 11 massacre a century-and-a-half ago, that may have been ordered by a mighty Mormon leader—and evokes the modern trauma of 9/11 that has moulded American politics for the past six years.

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