

The Rise of Freedom in America

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In his petition for prayer, Benjamin Franklin addressed the president of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington, by declaring:

In the beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection.—Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a Superintending providence in our favor. ... Have we now forgotten that powerful friend? or do we imagine that we no longer need his assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—*that God governs in the affairs of men*. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?¹

Throughout the history of the Restoration movement, Latter-day Saint leaders have emphasized that one of the great motifs which runs through the history of this nation is that God governs in the affairs of men.² Many have recognized that this divine influence is evident in the rise of freedom in America and that this freedom was one of the significant preliminaries to the Restoration. As President Ezra Taft Benson said: “This nation was established by the God of heaven as a citadel of liberty. ... It was here under a free government and a strong nation that protection was provided for His restored Church.”³

When Joseph Smith was born in Vermont on December 23, 1805, the United States had greater political and religious freedom than any other Christian land.⁴ Prior to the War

¹ Carl Van Doren, *The Great Rehearsal: The Story of the Making and Ratifying of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 101.

² Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 587; J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 11.

³ Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 569, 571.

⁴ Sanford H. Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), 2–6, 15–18, 509, 521–28; Richard L. Bushman, “1830: Pivotal Year in the Fulness of Times,” *Ensign*, September 1978, 9. For a discussion of the transformation of American Christianity following the American Revolution, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 3–15, 210.

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for Independence, however, Joseph Smith could not have written that he organized the Church according to the laws of New York. Significant advancements in political and religious freedom during the last half of the eighteenth century created conditions favorable for the organization of the restored Church in the land reserved for the Restoration.⁵

Prior to the Restoration, there had also been significant developments of freedom in Canada and Great Britain, and during the 1830s and 1840s many living in these lands were converted by Latter-day Saint missionaries.⁶ As Church membership increased, forces of intolerance intensified, especially in areas where Latter-day Saints gathered. Members of the restored Church were forced to leave Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. The wilderness of North America was one of the few places in the Christian world in the mid-nineteenth century where Latter-day Saints could gather, build communities, construct temples, and worship in peace.⁷

One of the unusual characteristics of Latter-day Saint theology is that modern scriptures, latter-day revelations, and teachings of living prophets have identified many significant precursors to the Restoration that relate to the rise of freedom in America. These developments emphasize that the hand of God was involved in the discovery and colonization of America, the American Revolution, the birth of a new nation, and the framing of the Constitution of 1787, including the Bill of Rights. In relation to these themes, modern scriptures also unfold God's will regarding political theory and practice.

A NATION LONG FORESEEN

The greatness of this nation was foreseen and foreshadowed by ancient prophets who lived on the American continent. Nearly six hundred years before the birth of Christ, Nephi saw in vision a series of developments relating to the colonization of America that preceded the Restoration. He beheld that many waters separated his people (early inhabitants of America) from others called "Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:10). He also foresaw

⁵ Milton V. Backman Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), chapters 4–6; Bushman, "1830: Pivotal Year," 9; Mark E. Petersen, *The Great Prologue* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 7, 31, 45–47; Arnold K. Garr, "Preparing for the Restoration," *Ensign*, June 1999, 38–39.

⁶ Backman, "The Birth of Mormonism in England and America," *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: British Isles* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1990), 1–32; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988), 94–121, 212; see also Mark A. Noll, ed., *Religion and American Politics from the Colonial Period to the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷ For a discussion of early missionary success, persecution and gathering of Latter-day Saints, see James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

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the modern discovery of America and its successful colonization by Gentiles. He declared that the “Spirit of God” “wrought upon [Columbus]” (verse 12) and also upon other Gentiles who “went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters” (verse 13). These colonists, Nephi learned, “were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful,” like his people “before they were slain” (verse 15). He also beheld that the Spirit of the Lord continued to be with them. They prospered, obtained the land for their inheritance, and became a mighty nation. Meanwhile, Nephi learned that the wrath of God would be upon the seed of his brethren because of their wickedness. They would be scattered and smitten by the Gentiles, but they would not be destroyed (see 1 Nephi 22:7–9).

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Nephi further foresaw that after his seed and all the house of Israel were scattered and confounded, God would proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, meaning the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ through them. Following this marvelous work, he beheld that the Gentiles would nourish his seed and others, including all the house of Israel. This nourishment was in fulfillment of the covenant of Abraham: “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 15:18; see also 22:7–9; 2 Nephi 10:7–14).

Nephi’s father, Lehi, also beheld visions and prophesied regarding the land where his people had established their homes and where others would eventually settle. “We have obtained a land of promise,” he declared, “a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my . . . children forever” (2 Nephi 1:5). He also predicted that this would be a choice land for all who would be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord and emphasized that the inhabitants of this “land of liberty” would be blessed and would not be brought down into captivity as long as they lived righteously. After Lehi predicted that none would come to this land except those “brought by the hand of the Lord,” he explained that it was wisdom that this land should be kept from other nations, otherwise many nations would overrun the land and there would be no place for an inheritance (2 Nephi 1:6–8).

Six hundred years after Nephi and Lehi unfolded prophecies about the American continent, Jesus Christ appeared to early inhabitants of this continent and informed the people that according to the wisdom of the Father, the gentiles would be established in this land as a “free people by the power of the Father” (3 Nephi 21:4). The Savior also identified a reason for this divine intervention. These developments would occur in order that the gospel truths might come forth from Gentiles who received the gospel unto a

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remnant of early inhabitants of America so that the covenant of the Father with Abraham might be fulfilled.⁸

Referring to the teachings of Nephi and the Savior, Elder Mark E. Petersen declared that Latter-day Saint missionary work was fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham. Since Israel was scattered among all nations, the restored gospel, he said, will be taken to all parts of the world.⁹

According to Latter-day Saints, the Lord also revealed to Joseph Smith that the New World was reserved for prophetic purposes of the last day, which included the establishment of Zion. "The building up of Zion," Joseph Smith taught, "is a cause that has interested the people of God in every age; it is a theme upon which prophets, priests and kings have dwelt with peculiar delight; they have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the day in which we live; and fired with heavenly and joyful anticipations they have sung and written and prophesied of this our day."¹⁰

SEEDS OF FREEDOM

A review of the pattern of settlement of the American continents reveals that this land was not overrun by people until after its discovery in 1492. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Portuguese settled Brazil and the Spanish colonized Latin America, Florida, and New Mexico. In the eighteenth century the Spanish established missions and settlements in Texas and California. The Spanish, however, neglected most of North America, opening an opportunity for England and other nations to colonize a vast frontier. The history of the United States would have been very different—politically and religiously—had Spanish institutions prevailed in what became the English mainland colonies.

Settlers who migrated to the thirteen colonies emigrated from the British Isles, Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and other European countries. Whereas Spaniards primarily came for gold (instant wealth), glory (adventure), and the gospel (to convert Native Americans to the Roman Catholic faith), most who migrated to the English colonies came in search of land, freedom, and new opportunities. Economic, religious, and sometimes political pressures forced most of these emigrants to endure the challenges of moving to the new world, and many came as indentured servants or slaves.

⁸ 2 Nephi 21:4; Petersen, *Great Prologue*, 3–5. For additional information on fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant, see E. Douglas Clark, *The Grand Design: America from Columbus to Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 109–16.

⁹ Petersen, *Great Prologue*, 3–4.

¹⁰ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 231.

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Since most of the early permanent settlers migrated from England and major waves of English immigrants continued to disembark in this land, the English language along with political and religious behavioral patterns became a dominant force in North America.¹¹

Historians have identified many seeds of freedom that were transplanted from the Old World to the English mainland colonies. Although most early settlers were so poor that they could not pay their own passage to America, they brought with them boatloads of cultural baggage.¹² This English culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contained many ideas and practices that developed into permanent characteristics of the United States. It included a belief in representative and limited government, division of powers, and the sovereignty of law. By 1776 many in this land also embraced the belief, popularized in England following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, that governments were instituted to protect the rights of the people.

Many religious behavior patterns were also transplanted to the New World, such as organized religions, a belief in the Bible, and an earnest quest to live in harmony with biblical teachings. The Pilgrims and Puritans brought to this land high ideals and standards and a covenant theology that served as a background to the American Revolution and Constitution. This theology included a belief in the autonomy or independence of local congregations. Congregations were comprised of covenanted believers in Christ who were committed to living Christian principles, which included civic responsibilities.¹³ Meanwhile, religious reformers from England, such as Roger Williams and William Penn, transplanted to North America principles of religious freedom, including the separation of church and state.

¹¹ Estimates based on the census of 1790 indicate that over 70 percent of Americans were classified as British. The next two largest groups were Africans at 19.3 percent and Germans at 5.6 percent (David K. Kennedy, Elizabeth Cohen, Thomas A. Bailey, and Mel Piehl, *The Brief American Pageant: A History of the Republic* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003], 1:57; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1790* (Washington DC, 1960), 11–12, 756; and Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation* [New York: Vintage Books, 1950], 111–23).

¹² Many volumes have been written on immigration to the colonies, including Jack Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York: Knopf, 1946).

¹³ For a discussion of covenant theology and its relationship to the Constitution, see Lynn D. Wardle, “The Constitution as Covenant,” *BYU Studies* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 11–28; for an evaluation of the importance of Puritanism in American history; see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 97–98, 130–34. For a comparison of motives and contributions of Puritans who participated in the Great Migration (1630–40) with others who migrated to English colonies, see Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *New England’s Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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Although there was unusual freedom in the English mainland colonies before the birth of the new nation, there were many forces of intolerance in colonial America that hindered a restoration of the gospel. Seeds of intolerance were planted in this land by some of the earliest settlers. Many firmly believed that there should be only one legal religion in their communities and that all settlers should pay taxes to support a state church. Prior to 1660, except primarily in Maryland and Rhode Island, there was religious uniformity not only in Latin America but throughout most of North America.

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Many forces helped change these political and religious behavior patterns inherited primarily from England. In the early 1600s, settlers from other lands, such as the Dutch and Scandinavians, moved into unoccupied river valleys of the middle colonies, which included Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. There they established small settlements with diverse cultures, including multiple Protestant faiths.

After 1660, in an effort to build and strengthen her colonies, England expanded her territory from Maryland and Virginia north to New England and south to Florida. To motivate non-English settlers to remain in the settlements seized by the British and to encourage people from other lands to migrate to America, the English government adopted a policy of toleration. Protestants from various countries were encouraged to migrate to the New World. The mainland English colonies gradually became a land where there was greater religious diversity than in any other section of the Christian world. The emergence of multiple faiths became a powerful force promoting toleration and increased freedom.

Near the end of the seventeenth century, toleration was advanced in Virginia and New England by pressure from England. Before the 1680s, with few exceptions, the only legal religion in Virginia was the Church of England and in most of New England (outside of Rhode Island) the Congregational Church. One of the significant changes in this religious pattern occurred following the Glorious Revolution in England. In 1689 Parliament passed a Toleration Act that granted Trinitarian Protestants (those who accepted the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as three persons of one essence) the right to hold public meetings. Its application in America granted Quakers, Baptists, Anglicans, and other Protestants the right to build meetinghouses and worship in public in all English colonies.¹⁴

Thus, toleration was increasing in the colonies, fostering a spirit of independence. America was isolated by a vast body of water and this isolation, coupled with the passage of time and the blending of cultures, produced change. The American environment also was a major force in advancing self-reliance and freedom. In Europe there was a shortage

¹⁴ Backman, *American Religions*, 145–146, 181–182.

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of land and an abundance of people. In America there was an abundance of land and a shortage of people. America became a land of economic, political, and religious opportunity. The frontier became a haven where people of various religious persuasions could secure land, become free from what they considered unjust laws, and in many instances worship according to the dictates of their own conscience. Nowhere else in the world was there such a rich frontier of freedom, equality, and opportunity.¹⁵

Since Trinitarian Protestants were the only Christians who could legally organize churches prior to the Revolution in most English mainland colonies, including New York, conditions were not favorable for the Restoration. In most colonies there were no Roman Catholic meetinghouses, and members of this faith could not legally vote, hold public office, nor worship in public. And immediately prior to the creation of the United States, Baptists in Virginia were imprisoned for preaching without authorization. Members of this same religious community were imprisoned in Massachusetts for failing to pay ecclesiastical taxes. In a letter to one of his friends in 1774, James Madison expressed his deep concern regarding persecution of Baptists in Virginia. "I . . . pray for liberty of conscience to all," he declared, and complained that the "diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some." At that moment, he explained, there were in adjacent counties "not less than five or six well-meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments."¹⁶

Although the Church of England was a tax-supported church throughout the South prior to the American Revolution, a majority of settlers in that region were not active supporters of that faith. As evidenced by actions taken by Americans immediately after declaring independence, most colonists in the 1770s favored disestablishing the Church of England by eliminating public support of Anglicanism.¹⁷ Such action was not possible, however, before the creation of a new nation. Since all of the southern colonies were royal colonies or colonies whose governors were appointed by the king, a law of disestablishment could not have been enacted before 1776. Had colonial legislatures passed such a bill, it would undoubtedly have been vetoed by a royal governor. These executives had absolute veto power. If, as a consequence of unusual pressures, a governor

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the impact of the frontier on American history see Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921); Wilbur R. Jacobs, John W. Caughey, and Joe B. Franz, *Turner, Bolton, and Webb: Three Historians of the American Frontier* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 1965); and David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1954).

¹⁶ William C. Rives, *History of the Life and Times of James Madison* (Boston, 1868), 1:43, cited in Milton V. Backman Jr., "The Influence of the Frontier on the Religious Revolt in Virginia" (master's thesis, University of Utah, 1955), 103.

¹⁷ Cobb, *Rise of Religious Liberty*, 114, 132, 493–99, 502–08; John Alden, *The American Revolution, 1775–1783* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 158.

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in a royal colony signed a bill that was not approved by the king of England or his advisers, the undesirable law could have been declared null and void by the mother county.¹⁸

SEEDS OF REVOLUTION

Although pressures from England had been a force advancing toleration in the colonies, prior to the Revolution some pressures were detrimental in advancing freedom. The Parsons Cause Case in Virginia is one example of the attitude of many colonists towards the practice of royal disallowance or England's interfering with colonial affairs. In the mid-1750s, many settlers in Virginia experienced economic difficulties, including increased debt and a drought that ruined crops of grain and tobacco. Subsequently, assemblymen enacted laws in 1755 and 1758 designed to help alleviate problems of "the poor and the needy" by reducing their ecclesiastical taxes. By law, ministers of the Church of England in Virginia were to be paid an annual salary from public taxes of 1600 pounds of tobacco—tobacco being the medium of exchange. Following the passage of these acts, ministers of the Church of England in America complained that their salary had been reduced by one-third. Their complaints were heard by government leaders in England. They exercised the right of royal review and declared on behalf of the king that these laws were null and void.

After learning about the king's veto, many Anglican ministers of Virginia were jubilant. Some thought they had won a financial victory, and some sought redress. One minister, the Reverend James Maury, sued a member of his parish to recover damages that he had suffered. Legally the settler owed Maury about three times more than he had paid him. A jury was summoned to determine the precise amount that the settler owed his minister. Patrick Henry, then relatively unknown, was called upon to defend the settler who was being sued. Patrick Henry's uncle was also one of the clergy in the colony who was suing for claims, and Henry's father was the presiding justice over the case.

The trial of 1763 in Virginia to determine the amount a citizen owed an Anglican minister ignited the interest of many colonists. A large crowd filled and surrounded the courthouse. During this trial, the young Patrick Henry, echoed the opinion of many settlers when he said in essence that a king, by disallowing acts of such a "salutary nature . . . , degenerate[s] into a tyrant and forfeits all right to his subjects' obedience." In the midst of these cries, Patrick Henry continued his attack on the king and clergy. The jury responded to Henry's arguments by rendering a verdict, "one penny damages," the

¹⁸ Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Coming of the Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 2–3; Jensen, *The New Nation*, 126–28; see also L. W. Labaree, *Royal Government in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).

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least amount that could be determined. Many believed that the people had won a victory. The ministers of Virginia could claim no further redress.¹⁹

Following the French and Indian War, settlers in the thirteen colonies were seeking greater freedom. They had matured, and they wanted to decrease their dependence on England. At the same time, England began tightening its grip on the colonists. Parliament decided that the colonists should share some of the expenses of maintaining the empire and levied for the first time direct taxes on people living along the Atlantic seaboard. There was a clash of interests. Colonists yelled, "Taxation without representation is tyranny." There was an explosion. And this blast led to a Revolution and the birth of a new nation.²⁰

A basic belief of the Latter-day Saints based on modern scriptures and latter-day revelation is that God played a vital role in securing America's independence from England. Approximately 2,300 years before the War for Independence, Nephi beheld the British, ("the mother Gentiles") gathered upon the waters and land to battle against the colonists, and he beheld that "the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle." Then he saw that the power of God was with the colonists who humbled themselves before the Lord and that by this power they were "delivered . . . out of the hands of all other nations" (1 Nephi 13:16–19).

As we reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the Americans and the British during the Revolution, we can better understand why many colonists recognized that God played a role in their victory. There were approximately 2.5 million colonists in comparison to 7.5 million people living in Britain. Britain had the greatest navy in the world. It not only had a professional army of fifty thousand but had also hired thirty thousand German soldiers. Meanwhile, most Americans did not actively support the Revolution; Americans struggled to organize and maintain a small army and never developed a powerful navy.

During the war England faced many challenges. They were fighting a war three thousand miles from home and fighting a country that had no major urban center. The American wilderness stretched a thousand miles along a rugged coastline and six hundred miles toward the west. Eventually other European powers, most notably the French but also

¹⁹ Letters of James Maury published in Ann Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York, 1853), 421; Cobb, *Rise of Religious Liberty*, 110–11; Backman, "Religious Revolt in Virginia," 94.

²⁰ Gipson, *Coming of the Revolution*, 10–13, 26–27, 85–86, 215, 232; Alden, *American Revolution*, 35–36, 127, 241–46; George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats* (New York: World Publishing, 1957), 4–34.

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the Dutch and the Spanish, declared war on England so that England had to divide its military strength and could not continue to concentrate on one enemy.²¹

After many devastating defeats, Americans learned to fight a war of defense, while the British continued to stumble as they tried unsuccessfully to develop a plan that would lead to victory. Although the British won most of the major battles of the Revolution, some Latter-day Saints have suggested that the Lord prevented British officers from identifying a battle plan that would lead to permanent rather than temporary success.²² Amid many frustrations, the British signed the Treaty of Paris of 1783 that sealed the creation of a new nation.

George Washington was one of many American patriots who testified that divine intervention was involved during the patriot struggle for freedom. He wrote on January 4, 1776, "How will it end, God in his great goodness will direct. I am thankful for his protection."²³ In March 1776 the general recorded, "The interposition of . . . Providence . . . has manifestly appeared in our behalf through the whole of this important struggle."²⁴ On August 20, 1778, he reasoned, "The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith . . . [who] has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations."²⁵ Following America's victory at Yorktown in 1781, he maintained, "The great Director of events has carried us thro' a variety of Scenes during this long and bloody contest."²⁶

Following the War for Independence, George Washington continued to give credit in his letters and public discourses for success in establishing a new land of liberty to a divine influence. "Heaven," he declared in 1783, had blessed and crowned the new nation with greater opportunities for political happiness than any other nation. He added that "the establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the Motive which induced me to the

²¹ Alden, *American Revolution*, 1–3, 9–10; Kennedy, *American Pageant*, 88–89; Jensen, *The New Nation*, 111–19; see also Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763–89* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

²² E. Douglas Clark gathered information from writings of the revolutionary generation that explained their acknowledgment of divine intervention during the American Revolution (see Clark, *Grand Design*, 65–87). For problems of British leadership during the Revolution, see Alden, *American Revolution*, 35–36, 39–40, 70–71, 97–196, 120–121, 127–128, 208–209, 240–247.

²³ George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 4:211–12. I am indebted to E. Douglas Clark for gathering these statements from the Fitzpatrick's *Writings of George Washington* (see Clark, *Grand Design*, 74, 79, 84–85, 97–98).

²⁴ Washington, *Writings*, 4:441, 5:93.

²⁵ Washington, *Writings*, 12:343.

²⁶ Washington, *Writings*, 23:356.

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Field; the object is obtained."²⁷ In December 1783, while addressing the legislature of New Jersey, Washington said, "I am heartily disposed to join with you, Gentlemen, in adoration to that all-wise and most gracious Providence which hath so conspicuously interposed in the direction of our public affairs and the establishment of our national Independence."²⁸ And on April 30, 1789, President Washington stated during his first inaugural address, "No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency."²⁹

The American Revolution was a turning point in history. The religious consequences of this war were in many respects greater than that which took place during any other major secular event in American history. The war acted as a catalyst, hastening the process of change. Many positive tendencies, forces, and developments that had long been gathering strength seemed to burst forth during the late eighteenth century.³⁰

FROM TOLERATION TO LIBERTY

After announcing that the united colonies were independent states, patriots commenced creating new state governments and a national government.³¹ Representatives of those who had supported the Revolution gathered to consider new forms of government. After many revolutionary leaders decided that the new governments should be based on written constitutions, Americans turned the new land of liberty into a laboratory of constitutional development. Never before in the history of the world had so many people become involved in creating patterns of government and declarations of rights.³²

²⁷ Washington, *Writings*, 24:497; 26:485; 27:249.

²⁸ Washington, *Writings*, 27:261.

²⁹ Washington, *Writings*, 30:293. In his popular work, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), 216, James Thomas Flexner wrote that although Washington endorsed the religious faith of the Enlightenment and did not believe many doctrines of the churches, he believed that a divine force ruled the universe. Since there are no or few references in most school textbooks on divine intervention, many students are not aware of the founding fathers' beliefs.

³⁰ Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 3–15, 210; Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 142–161.

³¹ Many forces influenced Americans as they began creating new governments, such as the humanitarian and political spirit of the Enlightenment, the frontier environment, and the spirit of independence and sovereignty promoted by Puritanism. Latter-day Saints add a divine influence to this list of formative forces.

³² Jensen, *The New Nation*, 125–28. For additional discussions on the framing of constitutions and development of political thought in the new nation see Will Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era*, trans. Rita Kimber and

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While Americans who supported the Revolution were involved in framing constitutions, they seized the opportunity to concentrate on various social and religious problems. Some of the religious issues which were discussed and debated at that time related to religious rights and the public support of religion. During the War for Independence, Roman Catholics, Protestants of various persuasions, and individuals who had rejected many traditional Protestant beliefs (such as the traditional view of the Trinity and original sin) united in a common cause. As they were waging war, they agreed to replace expressions of toleration that meant restricted rights with declarations of “freedom of conscience” that meant complete religious liberty.

The speed of this movement from toleration to liberty was remarkable. For example, within two years of America’s independence, the Church of England was disestablished in every new state where it had been a publicly supported religion. In 1776 the Church of England was disestablished in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. By the constitutions of 1777 framed in New York and Georgia, all denominations were placed on equal footing and people no longer were required to support ministers not of their faith, and in 1778 the Anglican Church was disestablished in South Carolina.³³

Virginians continued the religious upheaval in 1785 by adopting a bill written by Thomas Jefferson designed to extend complete religious freedom to all men. “‘No man,’ the law stated ‘shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burdened . . . on account of his religious opinions or belief; but . . . all men shall be free to profess . . . their opinions in matters of religion . . . and the same shall in nowise . . . affect their civil capacities.’”³⁴

Gradually the provisions included in the English Toleration Act of 1689 that granted only Trinitarian Protestants the right of public worship were replaced with laws granting liberty of conscience to everyone: Protestants and Catholics, Christians and non-Christians. All churches were to be granted equal legal rights. The rise of religious freedom in Virginia was of epoch-making significance. In the strictest sense, Virginia was the first state in the modern world to provide complete religious freedom for all denominations by legislative action. Thomas Jefferson regarded the adoption of this bill as one of the greatest accomplishments of his life.³⁵

Robert Kimber (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Jackson Turner Main, “Government by the People: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 23 (July 1966): 391–407.

³³ Backman, *American Religions*, 183.

³⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 1:256.

³⁵ Jefferson, *Writings*, 1:256; Backman, “Religious Revolt in Virginia,” iii, 128–129.

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The American Revolution also advanced toleration in New England. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the attitudes of many Congregationalists changed. The old concept that dissent was a heresy for which the community was responsible and that nonconformists profaned the word of God and prevented the growth of the kingdom of God was replaced with the view that dissent should be permitted and that religion should be supported by voluntary contributions. Many dissenters became honorable citizens, and the Congregational establishments were gradually abolished. Vermont separated church and state in 1807, followed by Connecticut in 1818, New Hampshire in 1819, and Maine in 1820. The last vestige of a state tax-supported religion finally disappeared in the United States in 1833, when the representatives of the people in Massachusetts adopted a system of voluntary support of religion.³⁶

The experiment in separation of church and state did not create in the new nation anarchy or a decline in organized religion as some Europeans anticipated. Instead, it paralleled the birth of a new and stronger religious fervor. Beginning about 1800 the most powerful and long-term religious revival in history began. During this Second Great Awakening, church membership and religiosity gradually increased. America set a worthy precedent that eventually influenced other nations.³⁷

Many Americans of the early republic recognized that a new religious era had been inaugurated. In a tract published in 1805, one of the New England leaders in the struggle for religious liberty, Baptist leader Isaac Backus, wrote: “We have cause to remember with thankfulness, that God has established a civil government over us, which allows equal liberty to all; so that each one may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. Such great, such unspeakable privileges demand proportional love and obedience.”³⁸

THE CONSTITUTION: A HEAVENLY BANNER

The changing attitude of Americans in favor of increased toleration during the formation of the new nation is clearly expressed in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The only reference to religion in the Constitution of 1787 prohibited religious tests as a prerequisite for holding office. Silence on this subject meant that delegates were not in favor of creating a national religion supported by public taxation or of requiring officeholders in

³⁶ Backman, *American Religions*, 184–185; Backman, “Preparing the Way: The Rise of Religious Freedom in New England,” *Ensign*, January 1989, 16–19.

³⁷ Backman, *American Religions*, 283, 302, 308–309.

³⁸ Isaac Backus, *A Great Faith Described and Inculcated* (Boston, 1805), 16, cited in Backman, *American Religions*, 185.

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the national government to be affiliated with any particular denomination. With the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1791, the First Amendment prohibited Congress from erecting a state church and interfering with the free exercise of religion. These decisions of the Founding Fathers increased movements of voluntarism and pluralism in which all churches eventually became voluntary institutions dependent upon the support of free people.³⁹

Latter-day Saints embrace many beliefs regarding the Constitution and its relationship to freedom and the Restoration. In 1833, shortly after approximately one thousand Latter-day Saints had been driven by mobs from Jackson County, Missouri, Joseph Smith received a revelation instructing the Saints concerning proper responses to this tragedy. Members were instructed to seek redress and redemption through legal channels (see D&C 101:76). In that setting Joseph Smith recorded information regarding the Lord's hand in the formation of the government of the United States and reasons for this divine influence. This revelation stated that the Lord "suffered" the laws and constitution of the people to be established and maintained "for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles" (D&C 101:77). "It is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another," the revelation continued. "And for this purpose, have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood" (D&C 101:79–80).

FOUNDING FATHERS

One reason so many positive changes occurred during the formation of this American land of liberty was the emergence of a group of remarkable leaders. Never before or since has there been such an array of talent concentrated in one time period in one country. Guiding the creation and development of the new nation were men such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, George Mason, and many others.

Throughout the history of this country, scholars have recognized that there was an explosion of political genius in eighteenth-century America. There was at the time of the framing of the Constitution an unparalleled power of political leadership. "The delegates [who gathered in Philadelphia] represented the best of American leadership at a time

³⁹ Backman, *American Religions*, 185; Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 142; Stephen Botein, "Religious Dimensions of the Early American State," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 317–322.

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when leadership was this nation's greatest asset."⁴⁰ Men of this convention had a realistic understanding of human nature and a discriminating capacity to learn from their own and others' experiences. They were a generation of activists who were thoroughly schooled in languages, the classics, and political thought. They had gained experience in creating governments unlike any other past leaders. Many had participated in formulating new patterns of government. Many recognized the weaknesses of the new state constitutions and of the first national constitution, the Articles of Confederation. Many had an intense interest in strengthening the existing government while restricting the power of government and protecting the rights of the people.⁴¹

Framers of the Constitution gathered with an acknowledgement of their challenges and a determination to improve the existing government. They recognized that they faced major challenges. How could they create a government that had power to be effective but not lead to tyranny? How could they divide power between the national and state governments? And how could they establish a government that would reflect the interests of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority?⁴²

Although the framers of the Constitution were united in some respects, they faced what seemed to be almost insurmountable obstacles. They brought to Philadelphia conflicting backgrounds, manners, passions, prejudices, and interests. They faced challenges of creating a new form of government and of securing approval from the delegates and public. When Latter-day Saints and many others consider the historical setting of the Philadelphia Convention, they appreciate George Washington's remarks included in a letter written to Lafayette in 1788, "It appears to me, then, little short of a miracle, that the delegates from so many different states . . . should unite in forming a system of national Government, so little liable to well-founded objections."⁴³ James Madison noted in the *Federalist* that it was a real wonder that so many difficulties were surmounted "with a unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected." Madison concluded that "it is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a

⁴⁰ Rex E. Lee, *A Lawyer Looks at the Constitution* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 11–13.

⁴¹ Lee, *Lawyer Looks at Constitution*, 12–13; Clark, *Grand Design*, 104; Richard B. Morris, *Forging of the Union, 1781–1789* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 268–269; Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention May to September 1787* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1966), 514.

⁴² Jack N. Rakove identified four major issues which the framers and ratifiers addressed: federalism, representation, separation of powers, and question of rights (see Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* [Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998]).

⁴³ Washington to Lafayette, February 7, 1788, cited in Dallin H. Oaks, "The Divinely Inspired Constitution," *Ensign*, February 1992, 68.

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finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution."⁴⁴

Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding premortal life and the nature of man provide distinct insights into the role of God in history, including the “wise men” who framed the Constitution. Our Father in Heaven is the Father of all spirits born in mortality. We are all brothers and sisters, and we lived as spiritual children with our heavenly parents. The prophet Abraham saw the “intelligences” who were living “before the world was” and learned that many were “noble and great.” Then referring to those who were good God said, “These I will make my rulers; . . . [Abraham,] thou art one of them; thou was chosen before thou wast born” (Abraham 3:22–23). Latter-day Saints believe that there were gradations of intelligence in that first estate. Subsequently, we established a premortal identity, and according to the Book of Mormon, some religious leaders were “called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works” (Alma 13:3). Commenting on this scripture, President Harold B. Lee said that although God may have called and chosen men in the spirit world or in their first estate to do a certain work, it is our right and privilege to exercise our free agency. We are left to choose good or evil.⁴⁵

As in this life, everyone in the premortal existence had agency or the power to choose or to act for themselves. The concept of agency helps explain differences that existed among us in the spirit world and continue in this life. We are born with different talents and capacities that we acquired before our birth in mortality.⁴⁶ Our Father in Heaven governs the affairs of men by placing specific individuals upon the earth to lead to lead at specific times and then inspiring and directing them.⁴⁷

Latter-day Saints teach that it was not an accident that a remarkable assembly of talent appeared on the scene at one time and in one nation. “Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world,” Joseph Smith said, “was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was.”⁴⁸ Church leaders also teach that the founding fathers came to this earth by assignment. They were not ordinary men but were chosen and held in reserve by the Lord for that specific purpose.

⁴⁴ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 271.

⁴⁵ Alma 13:3; *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 12–13.

⁴⁶ Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1985), 512.

⁴⁷ William O. Nelson, *The Charter of Liberty: Inspired Origin and Prophetic Destiny of the Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 15.

⁴⁸ Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 365.

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“America’s history was foreknown to God,” President Ezra Taft Benson added, and “through His omniscience and benevolent design He selected and sent some of His choicest spirits to lay the foundation of our government,” thereby fulfilling prophecies, advancing freedom and opening the door for the Restoration.⁴⁹ Rex E. Lee, former president of Brigham Young University, suggested that “this remarkably successful document did not emerge by chance or human wisdom alone. God had a hand in its creation—not in the same, direct, revelatory way that he creates scripture, but by assembling and inspiring . . . probably the most talented collection of statesmen with which any nation has ever been blessed.”⁵⁰

Wilford Woodruff testified of an unusual experience that helped him gain a greater appreciation for the early leaders of this nation. In August 1877, while President Woodruff was residing temporarily in St. George, Utah, “spirits of the dead gathered around [him], wanting to know why [they] had not redeemed them.” They said to him, “You have had the use of the Endowment House for a number of years, and yet nothing has ever been done for us. We laid the foundation of the government you now enjoy, and we never apostatized from it, but we remained true to it and were faithful to God.” Wilford Woodruff then said that the spirits who appeared to him and “waited on [him] for two days and two nights” were signers of the Declaration of Independence. “I thought it very singular,” he added, “that notwithstanding so much work had been done, and yet nothing had been done for them.” He supposed that he had never previously considered doing vicarious work for them because he was concentrating on his friends and relatives. “I straightway went into the baptismal font,” he asserted, “and called upon brother [J. D. T.] McCallister to baptize me for the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and fifty other eminent men, making one hundred in all, including John Wesley, Columbus, and others.”⁵¹

Throughout the history of the restored Church, Latter-day Saints have continued to emphasize that the framers of the Constitution were divinely inspired and that the Constitution of the United States is an inspired document.⁵² While imprisoned in the

⁴⁹ Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1946), 359–60; Benson, *Teachings*, 578; Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 11–14; Clark, *Stand Fast By Our Constitution*, 181–86, 190; Noel B. Reynolds, “The Doctrine of an Inspired Constitution,” in “*By the Hands of Wise Men*,” *Essays on the U.S. Constitution*, ed. Ray C. Hillam (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), 4–7.

⁵⁰ Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), “Constitutional Law,” 1:317.

⁵¹ Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 19:229; hereafter cited as *JD*.

⁵² Martin B. Hickman, “J. Reuben Clark, Jr.: The Constitution and the Great Fundamentals,” in “*By the Hands of Wise Men*,” 42.

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Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and other members wrote: “We say, that the Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner. . . . It is like a great tree under whose branches men from every clime can be shielded from the burning rays of the sun.”⁵³ President George Albert Smith stated that the men who were raised up by our Heavenly Father to frame the Constitution gave to us “the greatest Palladian of human rights that the world knows anything about.” It includes a “system whereby people could worship God according to the dictates of their consciences.”⁵⁴ And in an official declaration by the First Presidency in 1969, Church leaders declared, “We believe that the Constitution of the United States was divinely inspired, that is was produced by ‘wise men’ whom God raised up for this ‘very purpose,’ and that the principles embodied in the Constitution are so fundamental and important that, if possible they should be extended ‘for the rights and protection’ of all mankind.”⁵⁵

There is a difference between inspiration and revelation in Latter-day Saint theology. The difference is one of degree. Inspiration is a form of revelation that comes from the “whisperings of the Spirit” or “promptings of the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁶ The wise men who framed the Constitution were not prophets, and the Founding Fathers did not claim visions. They did not claim to have received direct supernatural powers from God like prophets of old. Instead of receiving direct revelation, as Rex E. Lee explained, the men who wrote the Constitution were divinely managed.⁵⁷ As William C. Gregg expressed in poetry, “He’ll call, persuade, direct aright . . . But never force the human mind.”⁵⁸

Legal scholars, including Rex E. Lee, have also suggested that the inspiration of the constitution is not reflected in every clause but in individual provisions and the overall structure. Some compromises were necessary at that time in order to satisfy the diverse interests and philosophies of the delegates. One of the miracles of Philadelphia was that the delegates reconciled their differences, as Washington, Madison, Franklin, and many

⁵³ Smith, *Teachings*, 147.

⁵⁴ George Albert Smith, Conference Report, April 1948, 182, cited in Jay M. Todd, “A Standard of Freedom for This Dispensation,” *Ensign*, September 1987, 12–19; see also *Sharing the Gospel with Others*, comp. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 168–169.

⁵⁵ “Official Declaration,” *Improvement Era*, February 1970, 70. For many additional statements on the Constitution as a standard of freedom by nineteenth and twentieth century modern prophets and many others, see Todd, “Standard of Freedom,” 12–19, and Donald Q. Cannon, ed., *Latter-day Prophets and the United States Constitution* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1991).

⁵⁶ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 383.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, “Doctrine of an Inspired Constitution,” 7.

⁵⁸ Quoted by Joseph F. Smith, in *JD*, 16:248.

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others recognized.⁵⁹ A number of representatives at the Philadelphia convention of 1787 would not have approved a document that included provisions that were later adopted, such as the Thirteenth Amendment that freed the slaves. Instead of freeing the slaves, the delegates adopted a compromise that limited the transportation of slaves into this country.

Latter-day Saints have also emphasized that the original document was not a final achievement. Although President Brigham Young taught that the Constitution was inspired, he said that it was not perfect. The inspired framers of that document laid the foundation, he explained, and it was the responsibility of later generations to rear the superstructure.⁶⁰ The Constitution has been modified, revised, and reinterpreted. The fathers were inspired to write in broad strokes in order to avoid cluttering the document with details so that it could serve as a flexible frame of government. Although it has been called a bundle of compromises, one of the remarkable aspects of the Constitution was “that it has continued to serve as our controlling organic document through almost two centuries of the most far-reaching political, social, and economic change that any nation has ever experienced.”⁶¹ Inspiration is reflected in the fact that the same document that aptly served the needs of a few million Americans who primarily lived in rural communities is now serving the needs of hundreds of millions of Americans living in an urban industrial society.

President J. Reuben Clark Jr., another legal scholar (who also served as a member of the First Presidency of the Church), suggested that divine inspiration occurred when the delegates developed a number of great fundamentals. According to President Clark, one of the divinely inspired objectives of those who framed the Constitution was to establish sovereignty in the people. They wrote in the preamble of their work, “We the people . . . do ordain and establish.”⁶² As representatives of the people, they considered that they were establishing a government with power, albeit limited or restricted power.

In addition to popular sovereignty, another great principle emphasized by President Clark was the separation and fusion of government powers. The three branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial) were severally independent yet mutually dependent. While each branch was independent and could not delegate its power to another, all of the branches were “bound together.” He added that this unification into an “efficient, operating whole” constituted “the marvelous genius of this

⁵⁹ Rex E. Lee, “The Inspired Quality and the Flexibility of the Constitution,” in *By the Hands of Wise Men*, 101–2; Hickman, “J. Reuben Clark, Jr.,” in *By the Hands of Wise Men*, 53.

⁶⁰ Brigham Young, in *JD*, 7:14.

⁶¹ Lee, “The Inspired Quality,” 101–2; Hickman, “J. Reuben Clark, Jr.,” 53.

⁶² In J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 147.

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unrivaled document." The framers of the Constitution had "no historical government precedent upon which to rely. . . . It was truly a miracle."⁶³

President Clark believed that there were other great fundamentals of the Constitution, such as the importance of rights, including the freedoms of religion, speech, press, and conscience as identified in the Bill of Rights. He also included in these inspired fundamentals the principles of equality, protection of minorities, and federalism. By creating a dual jurisdiction between the state governments and the national government, President Clark explained, the people have reserved to themselves or to their state governments every right and power they have not delegated to the federal government. This emphasis on local self-government was, in his opinion, one of the great preservers of liberty.⁶⁴

Elder Dallin H. Oaks also recognized divine inspiration in President Clark's great fundamentals and expressed his personal opinions as he discussed these principles: "Perhaps the most important of the great fundamentals of the inspired Constitution is the principle of popular sovereignty: The people are the source of government power. . . . I believe this is one of the great meanings in the revelation [D&C 101:78–80] which tells us that God established the Constitution of the United States. In other words, the most desirable condition for the effective exercise of God-given moral agency is a condition of maximum freedom and responsibility."⁶⁵

Latter-day scriptures not only identify a divine influence in the Constitution and laws of the new nation, but also describe principles of government that are in harmony with the will of God. Revelatory writings also relate these principles to agency and freedom. Following the eruption of persecution in western Missouri, Joseph Smith recorded a revelation that informed Latter-day Saints that the "law of the land which is constitutional, supporting that principle of freedom in maintaining rights and privileges, belongs to all mankind, and is justifiable before me" (D&C 98:5). Shortly after the expulsion of members of the restored Church from Jackson County, Missouri, Joseph Smith again recorded by revelation the purposes of constitutional government. "Just and holy principles" were established in order that each person might act in doctrine and principle according to the moral agency which the Lord had given him "that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment" (D&C 101:77–78).

⁶³ Clark, *Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, 147–150.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, 187–88; Oaks, "The Divinely Inspired Constitution," 68–74.

⁶⁵ Oaks, "The Divinely Inspired Constitution," 72. For a discussion of political developments from the divine right of kings to popular sovereignty in England and America, see Morgan, *Inventing the People*.

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Additional views of the Latter-day Saints regarding government and freedom are found in the Doctrine and Covenants in “a declaration of belief regarding governments and laws in general” (D&C 134 section heading). This treatise, generally attributed to Oliver Cowdery has been included in every edition of that work since 1835. Many concepts included in the statement published as section 134 harmonize with principles found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and writings of the founding fathers. “We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man,” section 134 begins, “and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society” (D&C 134:1). According to this declaration, governments approved by the Lord will promote peace and secure for individuals “the free exercise of conscience, the right and control of property, and the protection of life” (D&C 134:2). Governments not only have a right but are also bound to enact laws for the protection of all citizens in the free exercise of their religious beliefs. This statement also specifies that civil magistrates “should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul” (D&C 134:4).⁶⁶

A RELIGIOUS FRONTIER

Following the organization of the restored church, freedom was extended to a vast new wilderness in North America which provided a refuge for Mormon pioneers. The United States had abandoned claims to the region south of the Oregon Territory and west of the Rockies in 1819. Two years later, Mexico (a nation where there was only one legal religion) gained independence from Spain and secured the southwestern territory. Mexico, however, did not colonize most of the area later occupied by Latter-day Saints. In 1846, after being forced to leave Nauvoo and vicinity, Mormon pioneers moved west across Iowa toward the Great Basin. They were aided in this migration by the United States Army. In May of that year, the United States declared war on Mexico, which enabled Latter-day Saints to enter the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and worship without interference from the nation claiming the land. In 1848, by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States acquired the land that became the territories of Utah, New Mexico, and the state of California. Within thirty years, under the direction of President

⁶⁶ For more on this, see also L. G. Otten and C. M. Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Springville, UT: LEMB, 1982), 2:371–75; Donald Q. Cannon, “Church and State,” *The Capstone of our Religion: Insights into the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Larry E. Dahl (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 184–190.

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Brigham Young, Latter-day Saints founded approximately 350 settlements west of the Rockies.⁶⁷

One of the uncommon beliefs of Latter-day Saints that has persisted since the early years of the Restoration is that the birth of freedom in America opened the door for the Restoration. President Brigham Young declared that we believe the Lord prepared the day when he would bring forth his work in “a place upon His footstool where sufficient liberty of conscience should exist, that His Saints might dwell in peace under the broad panoply of constitutional law and equal rights.” In harmony with this view, he added that the “voice of the Lord inspire[d] . . . worthy men,” including Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, and a host of others, to deeds of resistance, to go forth in battle, and to exercise wisdom in council. These men also helped bring to pass the purposes of God in establishing a new government upon a principle of greater freedom, allowing the free exercise of religious worship. President Young concluded that they secured to themselves and succeeding generations “the blessings of a free and independent government.”⁶⁸

President Wilford Woodruff also identified a relationship between freedom and the Restoration. “As far as constitutional liberty is concerned,” he said, “the God of heaven has raised up our nation, as foretold by His Prophets generations ago. . . . It is through the intervention of His providences that we enjoy today the freest and most independent government the world ever saw. And what was the object of this? It was to prepare the way for the building up of the Kingdom of God in this the last dispensation of the fulness of times.”⁶⁹

In a discourse delivered in 1879, George Q. Cannon aptly summarized what has continued to be a basic belief of Latter-day Saints regarding freedom in America:

This American continent is the choicest land upon the face of the whole earth. God kept it hidden until the 15th century that it might not to be overrun by the people of Europe or of the rest of the world. He kept it hidden in darkness and covered with clouds until the set time had come when he could accomplish his purpose and prepare the way for the American Republic, under which his kingdom could be established. Could it have been established in Asia, in Europe, or in Africa? No,

⁶⁷ For a summary of developments during an age of manifest destiny, see Ray A. Billington, *The Far Western Frontier, 1830–1860* (New York: Harper, 1956). For an account of the Mormon colonization of the Rocky Mountain country, see Leonard Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

⁶⁸ Brigham Young, in *JD*, 2:170.

⁶⁹ Wilford Woodruff, in *Collected Discourses, Delivered by Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, ed. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank, CA: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987), 385.

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it required the Declaration of Independence framed by men inspired of God; the Constitution of the United States framed and adopted by men whom he had raised up; it required a people who had fought for their liberty, religious and civil, and who by his divine blessing had succeeded in gaining it and in establishing a free form of government. It required such a republican government as we have, to permit this people called Latter-day Saints to be organized, to grow and increase and become a mighty power.⁷⁰

According to Latter-day Saints, conditions were favorable in the early nineteenth century for a restoration in the United States. While religious liberty was becoming a legal reality, a major reorientation of religious beliefs occurred in the new nation. Beginning about 1800 there was also a new upsurge of religious interest which reached a peak during the 1830s and 1840s. Many were seeking religious truth and many united with different religious communities.⁷¹

A Latter-day Saint approach to world history takes the view that the Lord played a vital role in the rise of freedom in America and in preparing a land of liberty for the Restoration of the everlasting gospel.

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<https://rsc.byu.edu/window-faith/rise-freedom-america>

⁷⁰ George Q. Cannon, in *JD*, 20:339–340.

⁷¹ Backman, *American Religions*, chapters 4–6; Backman “Preliminaries to the Restoration,” *Improvement Era*, November 1958, 846–854.