

proceeded to talk about his grandparents and other relatives. It was quickly apparent that he knew the young man's family relationships better than he did.⁵⁵

Although Spencer lacked the fascination with political gamesmanship that some people have, as President of the Church he considered it part of his job to understand national politics and arranged a number of visits with Jack Carlson, an active Latter-day Saint who served as Undersecretary of the Interior under President Gerald Ford until 1976 and ran unsuccessfully for the Senate.⁵⁶ They discussed many issues, including the effects on the Church of its restrictive priesthood policy (see ch. 20).

Candidates for office sought out President Kimball. Early in 1974, Utah Attorney General Vernon Romney, Camilla's first cousin, consulted Spencer about whether to run for governor, as he was then inclined, or for the U.S. Senate.⁵⁷ Spencer had contributed \$200 to Romney's campaign for attorney general, so he saw Spencer as a friendly adviser. When Romney posed his question, Spencer said with his usual directness, "I can't tell you what choice to make, but I will kneel down and pray with you." He then talked about making a tentative decision and asking the Lord for confirmation, as suggested by Doctrine and Covenants section 9. Romney said afterward, "It was a very sobering experience to have the prophet pray with me."

The Church sought to maintain neutrality in partisan politics by welcoming politicians of all stripes who wished to pay courtesy calls on the First Presidency.

Spencer and the Politics of Ezra Taft Benson

As president Spencer disapproved of political statements by Church leaders as divisive. He was keenly sensitive that statements critical of foreign governments might hamper missionary work, especially in communist or fascist countries. He believed that, as long as members in a country were allowed to perform their religious ordinances and duties, the Church could operate under any form of government.⁵⁸ Thus he was concerned when Ezra Taft Benson took public positions on political issues because they often were pointedly anti-Communist. After serving in the Eisenhower cabinet as Secretary of Agriculture (1953–61), Elder Benson became a notable spokesman for ultraconservative views. In 1962, he publicly endorsed the John Birch Society as "the most effective non-church organization" in the fight against socialism and Communism.⁵⁹

Shortly after Spencer became President, Elder Benson was asked in an interview whether a good Mormon could be a liberal Democrat. He replied, "I think it would be very hard if he was living the gospel and understood it."⁶⁰ When the comment appeared in print, along with a

55. Catherine E. Edwards to Spencer W. Kimball, November 13, 1976.

56. For example, Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, January 5, 1976.

57. Excerpt from Romney, Personal history, January 29, 1974.

58. David M. Kennedy, interview by author, January 24, 1991.

59. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 67, 850. In October 1962, Elder Benson publicly approved of his son Reed's employment as the Utah coordinator of the John Birch Society. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 71. Elder Benson's espousing of ultraconservative politics is set out at length in chapter 3, "Ezra Taft Benson: A Study of Inter-Quorum Conflict," of Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 66–115. In January 1975, he requested that Robert H. Welch, head of the Birch Society, speak at BYU, but the request was denied. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 108, citing BYU President's meeting minutes, January 22, 1974, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

60. "Support for Candidate Possible Some Day, LDS Apostle Says," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 22, 1974, B1. David Briscoe, "Statement of Faith in America," *Deseret News*, February 22, 1974, B5, omitted the statement when it reported the same interview. Mormon Ralph Harding, former Idaho congressman, responded ("Mormons? 'Many Liberals,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 26, 1974, 24), as did many writers of letters to the

statement by Elder Benson that the Church might at some point endorse political candidates, it stirred a buzz of concern and a flood of protests to the Presidency.⁶¹ Spencer waited several days before discussing the matter with Elder Benson, who expressed regret that he had allowed the interview and apologized for the embarrassment his statements had caused the Church. Spencer understood his worthy motives and patriotic spirit, but reminded him that as president of the Council of Twelve he should avoid involvement in politically sensitive and potentially divisive matters.⁶² The interview closed on a cordial note.⁶³

But later the same year, at a November 1974 rally just before the election, his passion prevailed and in an extemporaneous expression, Elder Benson publicly endorsed the American Party. He noted that the Church was non-partisan, but he said he believed the American Party was established on divine, eternal principles. And he said:

Never in decades have I read a set of principles of any party that come so close to the philosophy which I have and which I think my own Church people have. . . . He went on to assert that “the real hope” of a nation in crisis lay with people such as those gathered at the rally.⁶⁴

Newspaper accounts of these statements caused a great stir, particularly when a radio report erroneously said the statements had President Kimball’s approval. Calls flooded the Church phone lines. Spencer hurried to his office to draft a statement reiterating, without direct reference to the specific incident, that “we take no partisan stand as to candidates or parties, and any person who makes representations to the contrary does so without authorization.”⁶⁵

The next day, election day, the First Presidency asked Elder Benson to meet with them. They “discussed at great length his unfortunate remarks” and counseled him that “all General Authorities must speak with one voice and . . . [not] take any partisan position in politics, either as to candidates or parties.”⁶⁶

Elder Benson made many noncontroversial speeches in favor of freedom. But he also gave

editor.

61. “Support for Candidate Possible Some Day,” B1. Spencer had Wendell Ashton collect official statements about Church leader involvement in politics in preparation for the meeting with Elder Benson. Wendell J. Ashton to Spencer W. Kimball, February 25, 1974.

62. In addition to worry about the divisiveness of political issues, the Church had concern about preserving its tax-exempt status. Under federal law if the Church used “a substantial part” of its assets and activities in attempting to influence legislation or elections, its tax-exempt status would be subject to challenge and there was no certainty how much “a substantial part” was. The church had plenty of opponents willing to challenge the Church, so notices repeatedly went out from headquarters reminding local leaders that chapels must not be used for political purposes. The 1976 Tax Reform Act gave some guidance, but only if the Church declared a choice. John W. Welch to the author, February 3, 2004.

63. Spencer observed a bit too sanguinely in his journal, “I doubt if he will get into politics any more.” Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, February 22, 1974. President Benson’s biography does not mention the incident. Various John Birch Society and Freeman Institute efforts to involve the Church were countered. See Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 468 n. 337 (1975, bar Birch speaker at BYU); Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 110 (1979, stopping Freeman Institute from advertising in Church buildings); Bergera and Priddis, *Brigham Young University*, 223 (1967, stopping surveillance of BYU faculty).

64. “Benson Tells Party Support,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 4, 1974, 29; “American Party Told, ‘Stand Firm,’” *Deseret News*, November 4, 1974, B14.

65. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, November 4, 1974; “LDS Presidency Reaffirms ‘Nonpartisan Politics,’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 5, 1974, 17; David Briscoe, “Church Says Elder’s Speech on Third Party ‘Unauthorized,’” *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, November 4, 1974, A-10, cited in Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 467 n. 329; Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, November 4, 1974.

66. Spencer W. Kimball, Journal, November 5, 1974.

some talks so pointedly anti-Communist⁶⁷ that others appeased Communist government officials in East Germany by saying, “There is only one person who speaks for the Church and that is the prophet; everything else is a matter of individual opinion.”⁶⁸

In February 1980 Elder Benson gave a talk at BYU titled “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet” that emphasized the precedence of living prophet’s statements over those of earlier prophets and asserted, “Those who would remove prophets from politics would take God out of government.” Some perceived his remarks as laying the groundwork for himself, as likely successor to President Kimball, to make his personal political views the standard for faithfulness.⁶⁹

Spencer felt concern about the talk, wanting to protect the Church against being misunderstood as espousing ultraconservative politics or an unthinking “follow the leader” mentality.⁷⁰ The First Presidency again called Elder Benson in to discuss what he had said and asked him to make explanation to the full Quorum of the Twelve and other General Authorities. Elder Benson told them that he meant only to “underscore President Kimball’s prophetic call.”⁷¹ A First Presidency spokesman Don LeFevre reiterated to the press the day after the speech that it is “simply not true” that the Church President’s “word is law on all issues—including politics.”⁷² The uproar continued, however, and a week later the First Presidency spoke to “reaffirm that we take no partisan stand as to candidates or political parties, and exercise no constraint on the freedom of individuals to make their own choices in these matters.”⁷³ Members should not expect narrow political guidance from the Church leadership.⁷⁴

With no counterbalance from a more liberal spokesman among the General Authorities, the Church’s leadership in Utah was widely perceived as a solidly Republican group. The statements of neutrality did not have any significant effect in persuading the general population otherwise.⁷⁵ One act by President Kimball, however, was revealing of his commitment to allowing

67. For example, “Pres. Benson Cites Threat of Communism to ‘Zion,’” *Church News*, October 13, 1979, 9.

68. Martin B. Hickman, *David Matthew Kennedy: Banker, Statesman, Churchman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 359.

69. See 1981 *Church Almanac*, 21–22; “Benson Backs Prophets’ Politics,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 27, 1980, B1; David Briscoe “U. Teacher Replies to Benson,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 28, 1980, B1, B3. “No. 2 Mormon Says Leader’s Word Is Law,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1980, pt. 1 p. 35; Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 468–69; Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 111, 469 n. 353; “Pres. Benson Outlines Way to Follow Prophet,” *Church News*, March 1, 1980, 14. Richard J. Cummings, “The Prophetic Quandary,” *Sunstone* 5, no. 5 (September/October 1980): 24, suggests that the talk may have been an impassioned response to a full page anti-Mormon advertisement in the Salt Lake Tribune two days before, trumpeting inconsistencies between latter-day prophets.

70. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, March 2, 1980. Camilla speculated that if one of the other apostles had given the same talk the reaction would have been much less. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, June 25, 1980.

71. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 469. Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 111, 469 n.353, cites George T. Boyd’s report from an unidentified General Authority and other second hand sources. Quinn to author, August 12, 1992. Boyd later identified Paul Dunn as his source. Boyd interview, August 16, 1989; Francis M. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson: Statesman, Patriot, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 284; Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 469.

72. “Interpretation of Speech Not Correct, Church Says,” *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, February 27, 1980, C1; Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 873. “Keep Partisan Political Actions Out of Church, Urge LDS,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 8, 1980, B1.

73. “Political Involvement Urged,” *Church News*, March 8, 1980, 3; “Church Policies and Announcements,” *Ensign* 10 (August 1980): 79.

74. “Political Involvement Urged,” 3. Church leaders had concern about the imbalance between the two major parties in Utah. The percentage vote for Ronald Reagan was larger than in any other state.

75. A January 15, 1998 First Presidency letter was read in American LDS congregations, to “strongly urge

expression of more than one political point of view within the Church. Elder Benson had for years acted to prevent any talks at BYU by communists, but Spencer approved the invitation of the chairman of the supreme court of the Soviet Union to speak at BYU law school.⁷⁶

While President Kimball and Elder Benson differed on the degree and manner in which Church leaders should speak on political issues, their personal regard for each other never wavered. Each appreciated the unswerving commitment of the other to the cause they had both served since 1943.⁷⁷

MX Missile Basing Proposal

One of the most controversial political issues on which the Church took a stand during the Kimball administration arose in October 1978 when the Pentagon announced that Utah was under consideration as the site for a system of new intercontinental ballistic missiles, called MX. It was hoped the powerful missiles would be an effective deterrent against attack by the Soviet Union.⁷⁸ In March 1979 three Air Force generals made a presentation about the MX to the First

men and women to . . . [be involved] in the political party of their choice” gave some comfort to those who saw the Democratic Party as having on the whole a better program. An interview of Marlin K. Jensen of the First Quorum of the Seventy and the Public Affairs Committee by Dan Harrie of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 23, 1998, said the Church would be better served by a more substantial Democratic Party in Utah, where Republicans were too closely identified as the Church party and Democrats were identified as the non-Church party. He expressed the wish that the notion “you can’t be a good Mormon and a good Democrat . . . could be obliterated.” He said of the First Presidency letter, “One of the things that prompted this discussion in the first place was the regret that’s felt about the decline of the Democratic Party [in Utah].” “To Have a Robust, Multi-Party System,” *Sunstone* 21, no. 3 (August 1998): 82–87 (transcript of Jensen interview); “LDS Democrats,” *BYU Collegiate Post*, January 30, 2001, 1; Hafen, *Disciple’s Life*, 492. Historically in presidential elections only one Utah county has voted for other than the Republican candidate even 50 percent of the time. Of twenty-nine Utah counties, ten voted for the Republican nominee more than 70 percent of the time. White, “Utah Voting Patterns in the 20th Century,” 149.

76. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, October 15, 1979.

77. Elder Benson’s biographer suggests that by 1984, at age eighty-five, he rarely spoke on political and economic ideologies because he recognized the complications that could cause for spread of the Church in the United States and abroad. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 475–76. When he became president in 1985, those who expected him to use his position as a platform for political activism, and particularly anti-communism, were surprised. He ignored those themes and concentrated instead on the importance of the Book of Mormon. Part of the reason may have been changes in national and international circumstances. A conservative president had been elected to the White House; the Cold War was over; international communism was faltering and would collapse four years later. Perhaps his counselors influenced him away from political themes on the grounds that they were distractions from the Church’s main objectives. Perhaps also he felt guided by the Spirit away from political themes.

78. Major sources for this section: Gordon Eliot White, “President Scraps the MX Shell Game,” *Deseret News*, October 2, 1981, A1, A2; Renee C. Nelson “Public Pressure Can Influence Government,” *Provo Daily Herald*, November 10, 1983, 23; Renee C. Nelson, “People Defeated MX,” *Provo Daily Herald*, November 9, 1983, 22. Edwin B. Firmage to author, May 23, 1986; Edwin B. Firmage, interview by author, June 6, 1986, after Firmage’s review of his 1980–81 journals; Scott Matheson, *Out of Balance* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1986), 55–86, 217. See Stephen W. Stathis, “Mormonism and the Periodical Press: A Change Is Underway,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 2 (summer 1981): 61–64; Steven A. Hildreth, “The First Presidency Statement on MX in Perspective,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 2 (spring 1982): 215–25; Steven A. Hildreth, “Mormon Concern over MX: Parochialism or Enduring Moral Theology?” *Journal of Church and State* 26 (spring 1984): 227–53. See also Pierre Blais, “The Enduring Paradox: Mormon Attitudes toward War and Peace,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 4 (winter 1984): 61–73; Matthew Glass, *Citizens against the MX: Public Languages in the Nuclear Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), reviewed critically in *Utah Historical Quarterly* 62 (fall 1994): 373–75; Edwin B. Firmage, “MX: Democracy, Religion, and the Rule of Law,” *Utah Law Review* 2004, no. 1, 13. See also MX Missile Records, 1976–83, and MX Coordination Office papers 1978–81, Utah State Archives (concerning planning for community impact); Citizens Alert papers, University of Nevada at Reno; and MX Information Center papers, University of Utah.