

many countries in the world and claimed that the U.S. government had allowed it to happen because they made political concessions to Marxist leaders. “The truth is,” he grouched, “we have to a great extent accommodated ourselves to Communism—and we have permitted ourselves to become encircled by its tentacles.” The Soviet Union and its “godless leaders,” Benson declared, were relentless in spreading their “ideology throughout the world.” They used “every stratagem” at their disposal to accomplish their nefarious purposes: “trade, war, revolution, violence, hate, détente, and immorality.” He counseled Latter-day Saints not to forget that the Soviets’ “great objective” was “world domination.” There was a “secret combination... among us,” he boldly declared, imploring Latter-day Saints to “demand of our elected officials that we not only resist Communism, but that we will take every measure to prevent its intrusion into this hemisphere.” For Benson, the stakes were high: “Never before has the land of Zion appeared so vulnerable to so powerful an enemy as the Americas do at present.”¹⁰⁴

Benson’s most controversial sermon, however, was given in a 1980 devotional address at Brigham Young University. In “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” Benson made a number of statements in what was a clear indication of “his own future intentions as church president.”¹⁰⁵ At the time, he was the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and stood in line to replace the ailing eighty-five-year-old Spencer Kimball, who suffered from declining health. Benson confidently assured BYU students and faculty that “the prophet will never lead the Church astray.” More controversially, he asserted “that the living prophet is more important... than a dead prophet” and added that “the prophet may be involved in civic matters.” For some critics, this marked Benson’s clear intention to have the church endorse right-wing political candidates in the name of God.¹⁰⁶ For others, it meant that Benson was a “false prophet” for callously dismissing the teachings of earlier prophets.¹⁰⁷

Scores of listeners expressed outrage over the address and flooded the First Presidency with letters. Additionally, news outlets picked up the story and criticized Benson for his blatant partisanship.¹⁰⁸ For Kimball, who shunned conflict, Benson’s divisive rhetoric posed a challenge to the church. He had already “called in [Benson] several times to discuss political statements he had made.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, he refused to publish Benson’s 1979 general conference sermon in international church magazines,

fearing it might impede church efforts to gain missionary access in communist countries.¹¹⁰ Benson's ill-advised BYU speech forced Kimball to call Benson in once again. According to general authorities with direct knowledge of the affair, President Kimball asked Benson to apologize to the Quorum of the Twelve but they "were dissatisfied with the response." The enfeebled president then instructed Benson to apologize again the following week, this time to a combined meeting of all the general authorities.¹¹¹ The apostle also prepared a written apology to the public, though it is not clear if he delivered it.¹¹²

Benson's BYU sermon was the last time he spoke exclusively in public about politics or communism. The church president had chastised him, indeed humiliated him, before his fellow general authorities. For the good of the church—and himself—Benson had the good sense to see that political winds in the church were shifting.

- Spencer W. Kimball ordained him an apostle, where he continues in that position today.
102. For Benson's skepticism about Oaks, see Ernest Wilkinson memo, "Personal and Confidential," May 5, 1971, Box 273, Folder 7, Wilkinson Papers.
 103. For a succinct discussion of Oaks's presidency, see Bergera and Priddis, *Brigham Young University*, 32–40.
 104. Benson, "A Witness and a Warning," *Conference Address* (October 1979): <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1979/10>. See also "Pres. Benson Cites Threat of Communism to 'Zion,'" *Church News*, October 13, 1979.
 105. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 110, explains: "To most observers, Benson's 1980 talk at BYU was an announcement of his own future intentions as church president."
 106. For Benson's address, see *BYU Speeches*, <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=view-item&id=88>. University of Utah philosopher Sterling M. McMurrin, for example, complained to Kimball that Benson's speech was "extremely divisive within the Church," predicting it would "undo much of the great good that was done by your 1978 revelation" lifting the priesthood ban. See McMurrin to Spencer W. Kimball, February 28, 1980, Box 16, Folder 1, Boyd Papers. Former BYU professor Richard Poll complained that if "Benson tries to put the prophetic imprimatur on this rightist crusade while holding prophetic office, the alienation within the American church will be profound." See Poll to David John Buerger, September 19, 1980, Box 46, Box 3, Poll Papers. See also the J. D. Williams papers (Box 28, Folders 1–3), which contain several protest letters from professors at BYU, Utah State, and elsewhere.
 107. Ogden Kraut to Ezra Taft Benson, April 6, 1980, Box 55, Folder 4, Arrington Papers.
 108. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 51, 237. See also "Prophet's Word of 'Law' Benson Tells Group," *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, February 26, 1980; "Mormon Professor Says Benson Speech Was Plea Anticipating Rise to LDS Presidency," *Idaho State Journal*, February 28, 1980; "U Teacher Replies to Benson," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 28, 1980; "Keep Partisan Political Actions Out of Church, Urge LDS," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 8, 1980; and "No. 2 Mormon Leader Says Leaders' Word is Law," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1980. The church-owned newspaper, the *Deseret News*, downplayed the controversy. See "Pres. Benson Outlines Way to Follow Prophet," *Deseret News*, "Church News," March 1, 1980.
 109. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 50.
 110. *Ibid.*, 163n19, 235.
 111. On May 30, 1984, Paul Dunn, a general authority, shared this story with George Boyd, a relative of Spencer Kimball. In Box 52, Folder 21, Marvin S. Hill Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. See also Leonard Arrington, journal, June 17, 1980, Box 34, Folder 6, Arrington Papers; Duane Jeffery, notes of conversation

with George Boyd, August 8, 1980, Box 45, Folder 9, Jeffery Papers; Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 111, 469n353; Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 237; Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 469; "What Mormons Believe," *Newsweek* (September 1, 1980): 71; and "Thus Saith Ezra Taft Benson," *Newsweek* (October 19, 1981): 109.

112. In "Apology" [1980], Ezra Taft and Flora A. Benson file, 1980–1992, LDS Church History Library.

CHAPTER 5

1. John Dart, "Spencer W. Kimball, 90, Dies: Led Mormon Church," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1985; Kenneth Woodward and Jack Goodman, "Thus Saith Ezra Taft Benson," *Newsweek* (October 19, 1981): 109; "Awaiting the 13th Prophet," *Time* (November 18, 1985): 85. Concerns over Benson's fitness for the church presidency had been expressed many years before Kimball's death. See "Smooth Succession," *Time* (January 14, 1974): 41; and John Dart, "Possibility of Benson Heading Mormons Worries Some with Different Views," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1976.
2. T.R. Reid, "Thousands Mourn Leader of Mormons: Benson, Likely Successor, Presides over Service," *Washington Post*, November 9, 1985; "Mormon Church Council Meets to Pick New Leader," *Dallas Morning News*, November 11, 1985; Bob Hudson, "Rumor Mongers Leave Unfulfilled," *Daily Herald* (Provo, UT), April 7, 1986. See also Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind*, 154, for the point that "most commentators feared an abrupt turn toward ultraconservatism given Benson's praise of the John Birch Society and his strong statements against communism and feminism in the past."
3. "Man in the News: Ezra Taft Benson; New Chief of Mormons," *New York Times*, November 12, 1985.
4. Christopher Smith, "John Birch Director Calls Utah Fertile Ground for His Society," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 14, 1993.
5. "The True Man of Principle: Ezra Taft Benson," *The New American* (December 9, 1985): 56. See also "New Head of the Mormon Church," *The New American* (November 25, 1985): 9.
6. First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve minutes, David O. McKay, journal, April 18, 1968, Box 67, Folder 4, David O. McKay Papers. For Hinckley and Monson as political moderates, see Robert Lindsey, "The Mormons: Growth, Prosperity, Controversy," *New York Times*, January 12, 1986.
7. For Benson's references to "secret combinations" as church president, see Benson, *A Witness and a Warning*, 6; "Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign* 16 (November 1986): 6; "The Savior's Visit to America," *Ensign* 17 (May 1987): 4; "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," 5; "I Testify," *Ensign* 18 (November 1988): 87; "Beware of Pride," *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 6; and "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," p. 4, Annandale Virginia Stake Conference, January 5, 1986, Box 199, Folder 1, McMurrin Papers. For