

# Hanging By a Thread: Mormons and Watergate

*By Eugene England*

England's analysis of the Watergate affair and how inconsistently with gospel principles most Latter-day Saints reacted to it.

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*It is said that brother Joseph in his lifetime declared that the Elders of this Church should step forth at a particular time when the Constitution should be in danger, and rescue it, and save it.*

—ORSON HYDE, 1858

**W**E LATTER-DAY SAINTS not only declare that the Constitution of the United States was divinely inspired but also think of ourselves as standing ready to make a prophesied defense, perhaps even a rescue, of it when it is in particular danger, at some time when it is to “hang by a thread.” Our republic has recently passed through one of its three or four most serious Constitutional crises, probably the severest in this century: Nearly thirty of the President’s closest associates, including Cabinet members, and finally even the President himself, have been found to have used the power of the Presidency and the agencies it controls to wage illegal political warfare on their “enemies” and then to sidetrack the justice that should have pursued them. Because of a set of fortunate coincidences—a night watchman noticing a piece of white tape ineptly placed on a Watergate door lock, an off-hand revelation by a former White House aide during the Senate Watergate hearings that President Nixon had secretly recorded his own conversations, the appearance at the right time and place of two determined and resourceful young reporters and two stern and persistent judges and, even more, because of a series of miscalculations that can be seen to have grown directly out of President Nixon’s tragic flaws of overweening pride and paranoid insecurity—because of these our country has very narrowly escaped having a President succeed in massive, consistent abuse of his Constitutional powers, destruction of our Constitutional protections and undermining of Constitutional legal processes. It would seem useful to assess how Mormons, given our great expectations, responded in this crisis.

Mormons, it seems, have always been quite taken with Nixon; we have approved of his public emphasis on traditional, conservative values—strong anti-communism, personal morality, law and order, respect for established authority, “peace with honor.” We have liked the way he sounded—moralistic, patriotic, not at all threat-

ening (as McGovern was) to our new and hard-won economic privileges as generally comfortable, middle-class Americans. I certainly liked that kind of talk in 1960 and voted for Nixon despite my intuitive attraction to Kennedy. Utah went strongly for Nixon then and again in 1968 and 1972. In fact, during the election campaign of 1972 I visited Utah and found that even mentioning McGovern among my Mormon friends and family was not a mere political foible, it was an irreligious act!

About that time an article on Nixon appeared in *McCall's* magazine which included a quote, about the kind of people Nixon likes, from Charles W. Colson (then the President's Special Counsel, recently released from prison where he was serving one to three years for his part in violating the files of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist):

He has no use for soft people, He has disciplined, believing people around him. Mormons, Christian Scientists, conservative Jews, conservative Catholics. . . . They have a sense of mission, are believers and are moralistic like he is.

We were then still innocent enough to see that as a compliment to the Church, but can now, I trust, recoil from such an association. However, we need to look closely to see what we should have learned in the meantime.

By April of 1973 some of those "disciplined, believing" people around the President were starting to desert him; as cracks developed in the "stonewall" that, as it now turns out, he had erected through lies and misuse of his powers, he went on TV to appeal directly to the American people, who had recently elected him with the largest majority in our history. I wanted to trust him, but as I looked and listened I felt strongly, through what I had come to believe was the spirit of discernment, that he was not being truthful, that he was indeed covering up. But later, I was surprised to find that most Mormons I knew had fully believed the President—and were already beginning, at his cue, to turn their anger on the press and then on Congress for building this "third-rate burglary" all out of proportion.

The people I'm talking about are in most cases devoted Latter-day Saints of towering goodness and integrity; they are not merely "moralistic" (in Colson's revealing word), but deeply *moral*, and, though most of them are not sophisticated in the usual sense, they are deeply insightful about things I know are important. I decided to reassess my discernment. But I found, as the Watergate Senate hearings proceeded, that I could not escape a growing sense that Mitchell and Haldeman and Erlichman were lying; worse, they were doing so with open contempt for the Constitutional rule of law and with self-righteous loyalty to what they considered to be the higher, the absolute, power of the President and to his judgment about the best interests of the nation. But again I found Mormons generally sticking with the President.

During one discussion a friend gave some good advice: "You've always preached against quick or harsh judgments of people; you should assume the President is innocent until there is clear evidence otherwise." So I waited, and the evidence began to build as Nixon was forced into a series of strange blunders and strategic retreats: the firing of Archibald Cox, whose investigations we can now see were getting too close to the truth; the missing and erased tapes, which we now

know there was good reason for someone to tamper with; defections and confessions by other involved aides that brought implication of involvement in the cover-up closer and closer to the President; and finally his own release of tape transcripts last April. Nixon claimed those transcripts would fully clear him, but (despite, as we learned recently, being heavily doctored) they not only revealed in stunning detail what Republican Hugh Scott, earlier one of the President's most vocal defenders, call "deplorable, disgusting, shabby and immoral performances," but by any objective reading indicated the President's complicity in paying "hush money" to keep the Watergate burglars quiet.

With increasing anxiety I found the sentiment of many Mormons I knew remaining with the hard-core twenty-five percent of Americans who loyally continued to approve of the President and to see his problems as the creation of a left-leaning press and a vindictive Democratic party. But as I visited Utah in December, 1973, and then in April and June of this past year, I began to see some things in that support less admirable than the patience and charity my friend had earlier counseled. People I love and respect, their extreme loyalty confronted with awkward evidence, began to grope toward a frightening kind of situation ethics that they have rightly condemned in others. I saw them following the line of commentators like William Buckley and Paul Harvey, who now, contrary to the strict "law and order" moralizing that had characterized their past attacks on hippies, draft evaders, left-wingers, etc., had fallen into saying that even if Nixon was guilty what he did was not very serious (or was outweighed by the good he had done or justified by the ends he was serving)—and besides it was just what every president and politician has done.

This is the most insidious poison that Nixon has injected into our system—this ethical confusion and relativism—and it perplexes and worries me that many of us in the Church seem to have been infected by it. In this lies Nixon's profoundest betrayal; leading into a moral swamp many sincere and honorable loyalists, who because of his moralistic pretensions gave him their sacred trust. Perhaps some of the qualities we Mormons value most in ourselves—such as our moral seriousness and our high estimation of all human beings as potential gods—make us gullible, easily taken in by *moralism* or *legalism*, the appearance rather than the substance. Perhaps we need to cultivate other, more neglected, Mormon values, like anxious pursuit of the truth and realization that its sources are many and its refinement never-ending—that it is something after all that requires continuous discovery and revelation. We need to read more often and apply more pointedly the Lord's own warning in the Doctrine and Covenants about power: ". . . it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion."

But I have also seen another profound danger in the effects of Nixon's betrayal on Mormons, a turning from gullibility—from perhaps too unthinking approval of Nixon—to cynicism about all politics. It is another in the long list of tragic ironies of Watergate that Nixon, whose oft-repeated boast (which might now serve as his epitaph) that "At bottom I am a political man" and who took pride in the pragmatic flexibility and skill at assessing and exploiting the popular will that he associated with that label, should perhaps have irretrievably confirmed the common suspicion

that all politics and public employment are necessarily “dirty tricks” and self-serving manipulation of others and improper use of power.

This is especially tragic because we are clearly at a time in our history when we need more than ever to attract good people to the honorable and crucial profession of public service. And Mormons in particular need to keep faith in such service: It seems to me more and more likely that if we are to have a hand in preserving the Constitution—its guarantees and freedoms—it will not be in some dramatic way at a time of crisis but in the steady, supportive service of a large number of Elders and Sisters at all levels of appointed and elected government. Politics is not an intrinsically compromising activity. It is not necessary to take the road of win at any cost or to gather amoral yes-men around you (or be such) in order to be an effective politician or public servant. Mormons in Congress and in the various federal departments, both the influential and the unassuming, are now contributing and could contribute more effectively in the future to our nation’s political life.

Fortunately, there has been a sharp contrast to Nixon’s kind of “politics” provided by the dignity and courage of thirty-eight members of our Congress in the televised debates of the House Judiciary Committee—especially in the painful decisions and statements of the Republicans who voted against their President and their party leader in the face of what many of them were certain would be great political cost. Nixon helped heighten the comparison when he had his press secretary label that extremely cautious and responsible proceeding a “kangaroo court.” Surely it was one of the proudest episodes in our history and in the defense of our Constitution.

Loyalty and means and ends. These are the central issues, and we Mormons have some great theology that should have helped us with those issues in the Nixon Era. On Sunday morning, June 10, our family was at the choir broadcast in the Salt Lake Tabernacle when it was announced that then Vice President Ford would be there after the broadcast to be honored by a special choir program. He was accompanied by the First Presidency and introduced by President Spencer W. Kimball, who conveyed, in moving sincerity, a special response to the growing cloud over the White House, a message for the man who is now our nation’s President: “We know there have been problems, but we are a loyal people, deeply loyal.” I said (and say) amen to that, but, because I know and am troubled by the interpretation of that statement by some who were there in the Tabernacle, I have to ask us all, “Loyal to what?” I feel certain President Kimball would say he meant loyal to the Constitution, to principle, to the law—not, as Nixon asked of his aides and finally of the American public, blind loyalty to mere authority, or acceptance of evil means in pursuit of good ends dictated by that authority.

A unique and central characteristic of the Restored Gospel (setting it clearly apart from most traditional Christianity) is that it is “rationalistic” in the technical theological sense—that is, not “voluntaristic.” It is based in faith in an ordered, *rational universe*, rather than one arbitrarily *willed* by a sovereign and inscrutable God and thus beyond man’s understanding. James Reston has said, reviewing the many strange but morally fitting circumstances surrounding Nixon’s downfall, “There seems no end to the irony of this drama, and so many odd and unexpected revelations and punishments have come about that it almost sustains the moral

interpretation of history.” Mormons do accept that moral interpretation of history, because we believe in a moral universe: “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated.” God does not decide what is right and good and true from moment to moment, nor did He in the beginning. The laws of goodness and truth are *natural*, inherent in the very nature of things which have always existed, “co-eternal” with God and man (and physical laws) and “irrevocable”—and thus knowable through human experience and analysis as well as through revelation. Truth is something that can and should be *discovered* and that then directly demands and merits our loyalty, not something we wait for some authority to decide for us. To be sure, some truths, especially moral principles and the central truths of the process of salvation, are hard or dangerous to get at by our own experience alone, and so we are rightly cautioned to take seriously accumulated human insight and experience, especially that available in the Scriptures, and to listen to prophets through whom God can point to truth and right action. But we are continually warned, *commanded*, that we must still study a matter out in our own minds and hearts and be loyal to it only when it thus becomes our truth. And the truth about what is evil, harmful, unlawful, does not change when it is done in the service of high authority or high-sounding purpose—like “national security.” We believe that we are accountable not just to leaders, but to the universe, to the nature of things; and leaders are accountable to the universe too. We believe that even God is God because He knows the nature of the universe and obeys. And the Lord made it clear to Joseph Smith that the central principle of (and reason for) the Constitution, which had been wrought “by the hands of wise men, whom I raised up unto this very purpose,” was that human rights are not a matter to be given or taken away at the will of a government (even a President) but were “inalienable,” inherent in existence; the government’s chief responsibility, the central reason for maintaining the Constitution, was “for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles.”

I have been disappointed over this past two years that too many of us in the Church have seemed less loyal to those principles than to a man and his “politics.” And perhaps my greatest hurt and shame has been that not only have the defenders of the Constitution in the Church seemed few and late, but, besides a BYU student who got caught up in White House political spying (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January, 1973), a few other “Elders of Israel” seem to have been among those cutting the few threads still holding the Constitution up. One, ironically, was spying on Nixon rather than for him, but he did it with the same unquestioning, overzealous devotion to the direction and approval of his superiors as did the President’s men; using his position as a stenographer for the military liaison unit attached to the National Security Council, and thus sometimes a traveling secretary with Henry Kissinger, he stole hundreds of copies of top-secret documents, notably reports by Kissinger for President Nixon on negotiations with China, and passed them on through his superior officers to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In an interview about his actions, this spy for the Pentagon explained, “I’ve always done whatever I was asked to do with complete dedication and loyalty to the government.”



A few Mormons have, of course, played honorable, some even rather important positive roles in this crisis: Judge John Sirica's law clerk, Todd Christopherson, who did much important research for the case, is a Mormon; columnist Jack Anderson very early got hold of the Grand Jury transcripts, publication of which helped keep the pressure up that finally led to exposure of the cover-up; Utah Congressman Wayne Owens acted and spoke effectively as a member of the House Judiciary Committee (" . . . the history of tyranny is very long, and the principal source of oppression has always been the unrestrained power of the state"); Utah Senator Wallace Bennett was one of the six senior Republican Senators who met, after the President's release of tape transcripts absolutely proving his involvement in the cover-up, and helped set up the meeting of Nixon with John Rhodes and Senators Hugh Scott and Barry Goldwater that was perhaps the decisive factor in the President's facing of reality and reluctant decision to resign. But even these few stalwarts played no crucial role—nor could be expected to; they played out the part history gave them with honor and, yes, with the assistance of their Gospel training and convictions. And that, again, is perhaps the best we should hope for. In fact, it seems that some of the most dangerous people during this time have been those who, with religious intensity, arrogated to themselves—or their leaders—the unique power to “rescue” the country or the Constitution and in tragic pride destroyed the rule of law in order to “save” it. What we have needed, and I believe can best provide as Mormons involved in the political process, is a steady, courageous integrity to basic Gospel principles concerning the proper relationships between freedom and authoritative leadership.

During this shameful time we have been made aware of the opposite kind of leadership from that of Nixon and his cohorts—by a person also caught up in the problems of loyalty and means and ends, but with very different results. We have seen the anguish and triumph of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who, with far greater excuse to do otherwise than those involved in Watergate, refused to bow to unrighteous authority or to submit to evil means; false accusation of others, acquiescence, even the mere silence that nearly all of his countrymen adopted when in danger—all these means he declined to use, even in pursuit of the high ends of preserving his freedom or life or staying in his homeland. And because he did so refuse, he was able to perform an incalculably precious service; single-handedly, perhaps, he saved the truth of Russian history of this century for his people and the world. And what is that desperately important truth? That any authority which cares only for its own survival, for “winning,” and calls all opposition its “enemies”—and then is supported unquestioningly in its “high purpose” of preserving “national security” by its people—can quickly become a monster of destruction, devouring those very people into giant prison systems (the “Gulag Archipelago”) and destroying them by the millions.

Republican Congressman William Cohen sounded the warning for us in the impeachment debate: “When the Chief Executive of the country starts to investigate private citizens who criticize his policies or authorizes his subordinates to do such things, then I think the rattle of the chains that would bind up our constitutional freedoms can be heard.” Solzhenitsyn shows us conclusively that when good ends

are used to justify evil means those means invariably corrupt the ends. When the admirable, idealistic dreams of the Russian Revolutionists were used to excuse mass harassment of their countrymen who disagreed with them—and then in natural progression to excuse mass arrest and mass execution—the dreams turned into the hellish nightmare of a police state worse than the Czarist tyranny their dreams had led them to rebel against in the first place. But Solzhenitsyn also gives us an unforgettable vision of an alternative, of the *refusal* to accept evil means to achieve defensible ends, even survival. He tells of people—a few—in the prison camps who, despite the unimaginable pressures on them to lie and inform and steal and take advantage of each other, remained true to their sense of the moral nature of things, responsible to a moral universe even at the cost of suffering and death; and they thus achieved a kind of inner peace and outer radiance that Solzhenitsyn likened to sainthood.

My fellow Saints, you may ask why we should review all this. I certainly have no desire to take some kind of verbal revenge on Nixon; I hope he—and all of us—can find forgiveness and atonement. But first Nixon—and all of us—must look at all the evidence and face his unique guilt, which his resignation speech and his reaction to President Ford’s pardon indicated that he has incredibly still failed to see. He is still thinking of this as another of his “crises,” an impingement on him of unfortunate events for which he has no real responsibility; he even cravenly blamed his decision to resign on lack of support in Congress, where a band of loyalists, the last of the many he had sent forth to a doomed fight without giving them the weapon of truth, had risked all to support him and found themselves absolutely betrayed by his final revelation of lies and withheld evidence. The missing element in this otherwise classical tragedy is that of recognition. Most of the felled protagonists seem to have learned *nothing*. The recently convicted Haldeman and Erlichman and Mitchell continue to claim complete innocence.

But have *we* really seen the pattern of government abuses, the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that were wrong here? Have we recognized that Nixon introduced an entirely new and terribly dangerous dimension into our political life? He, for the first time, used both the moral perspectives and the techniques of international espionage within our own *national* election process. He broke entirely the sense of an ultimate bond of honor and trust between even the bitterest opponents that had before characterized our Constitutional election process. He promoted the belief that a political opponent was an enemy of the nation, to be defeated by any means—and even then further pursued and punished, not only by “dirty tricks” but through harassment by the Internal Revenue Service and the CIA. This is clearly the first step toward the Gulag Archipelago. We narrowly missed taking it, and without careful understanding of the past and great vigilance in the future, we still could take it. Our great Mormon tradition of being special defenders of the Constitution can serve us well in maintaining such vigilance, *if* we can learn the lessons of Watergate well and can commit ourselves to understanding the Constitutional freedoms and the special dangers to them posed in our time.

Do we really see this or are too many of us merely infuriated at a hero’s—or glad at an enemy’s—fall, unwilling to perceive a standard of truth in the universe

that goes beyond politics and that we must also apply to other leaders, including ourselves, in government, business, and Church? Is Andrew Hacker's comment true of us: ". . . the only people who reflected seriously on the Watergate affair were those few Republicans on the Judiciary Committee who first shifted and voted against Nixon. They were beginning to see a pattern of lawlessness that bothered them down to their moral marrow. I am not sure that message got across to most Americans." Or are we willing to be loyal to *truth*, wherever it leads and whatever it costs us personally?

Despite our being, according to Colson, one of the groups preferred by Nixon, a man of somewhat questionable judgment, it seems, my sorrow and shame is not that we Mormons responded worse than others in this time—we didn't. But there is no evidence that, despite our pretensions and traditions, we responded any better. I realize it may seem that I am preaching to the converted, that most *Dialogue* readers—particularly those in Washington, D.C., who, in shock and anguish, discerned Nixon's guilt quite early—might claim to agree with me to this point. But we are *all* involved, at least potentially, in this failure: We didn't—and don't—speak out early enough or clearly and effectively enough; we too misuse our authority—as community, school, and Church leaders—not grasping our opportunities for moral leadership, for pointing to the moral nature of things, but rather keeping silent or speaking only within our own dogmatic political "truths" and loyalties. (I know I was at times vindictive in conversations with my friends, wanting mainly to prove I was right; I know that, as a branch president and husband and father and teacher, the tendency to exercise unrighteous dominion is always with me.) We need, in Thomas Mann's apt phrase for true religiousness, "attentiveness and obedience," not to the arm of flesh but to discovered and revealed truth. We must consider carefully and speak out now in this time of reassessment so that the lessons we as a nation might have learned will not be lost in mere relief to be done with the nightmare. If there is to be a catharsis of guilt, it must still be earned, gaining for us, the spectators, if not for the protagonists, lucidity and change.

And there are some special questions for us to consider in this process:

*Were we (and are we) guilty of greater reverence for authority than for truth?* Do we tend too easily to transfer our well-founded veneration for our religious leaders over to our political leaders, so that we neglect other Gospel values?

*Why didn't our great doctrines and traditions help us be more perceptive and true to principle?* Why were we so anxious about avoiding embarrassment to our leaders that we refused to see the evidence until we were clubbed by it—and then still tended to slip off into ethical relativism in order to excuse those leaders?

Given our great faith in Constitutional government and our natural optimism, *why have we been willing to fall into the cynicism of other Americans following the Watergate exposures?* Can we recover sufficiently to give the kind of humble, intelligent service that might best help preserve the Constitution? In fact, can our tradition of being potential rescuers of the Constitution be turned from what it has been for many of us, a rather presumptive and passive waiting for a crisis like Watergate (where we didn't show much saving perceptiveness), to being anxiously engaged in efforts to understand and increase the Constitutional guarantees and



freedoms—rather than merely being loyal to leaders who claim to be protecting those freedoms for us? (How would we fare, for instance, on the survey conducted a few years back, in which a majority of a group of Americans, asked to comment on unidentified quotations from those Constitutional guarantees, rejected them as communistic or radical?)

I share President Ford’s heartfelt wish for peace for Nixon and his family—and wish it for us all, but only as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling. As Archibald Cox, the man Nixon fired for pursuing the truth too closely, said of him after the resignation, “The destruction of any man is a very, very sad occasion.” And this was a tragic fall—though there was no hero—an occasion indeed for pity and terror.

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