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## Review Panel

Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016.

*Reviewed by Dave Hall, Susanna Morrill, and Catherine A. Brekus*

**DAVE HALL:** This work gathers in one useful volume documents pivotal to understanding the early history of Mormon women. Adding to its value is the wealth of knowledge contributed by its editorial team, headed by experienced scholars Jill Derr, Carol Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew Grow. Derr and Madsen in particular are true pioneers in the field of Mormon women's history who have mastered the sources and their import through decades of research. A team of skilled "contributors," "research specialists," "editorial staff" members, and others also left their mark. What results is an insightful and thought-provoking collection that illuminates and explains the high points of the first half century of the Relief Society.

The first thing that strikes one about this book is its heft. This is a substantial volume produced to the same high standards that we have come to expect from the Church Historian's Press. As such, it is a testimony to the seriousness with which the Church History Department now approaches the story of Mormon women. Each page reveals careful scholarship and thoughtful, nuanced interpretation. Footnotes are plentiful and addressed nearly all of my anticipated questions. A wide

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range of archival sources are cited, while published sources drawn upon are of the highest order and are exhaustive or nearly so.

The volume, which begins with a general introduction explaining its scope and methodology, is divided into four main sections demarcated by natural milestones in the history of the society. Each section has its own introduction providing a framework for understanding the primary materials that follow, and each primary document is itself prefaced briefly with information providing context and setting.

The first section, covering the years 1830 and 1842–1845, begins with the “elect lady” revelation of 1830 and then moves to the developments of the Nauvoo period. The heart of this section is the full text of the “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” where readers find the commission given to the society by Joseph Smith and see his portrayal of the organization as essential to the church’s structure. The Relief Society is shown in this section quickly moving to function in a variety of capacities, from assisting the poor to defending the church from its detractors. Especially helpful is the careful commentary leading the reader through the society’s relationship to the priesthood, questions of its autonomy, and women’s roles in exercising spiritual gifts. As the section draws toward its close, the subsection “The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo” illustrates tensions within the Relief Society over plural marriage and demonstrates Emma Smith’s efforts to undermine its practice. In the documents that follow, Brigham Young’s 1845 observations made in priesthood meetings reveal that he attributed the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith to the sentiments expressed in the previous selection. Consequently, he decisively terminated the Relief Society’s activities for the remainder of the Nauvoo period. A final entry in this section focuses on Eliza R. Snow’s poem “My Father in Heaven,” published in October 1845 in the *Times and Seasons*. This became the hymn “O My Father,” which preserved and popularized Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo teachings concerning a Mother in Heaven. Much of the material in this section is familiar to scholars, but it is useful to have it brought together in one place with helpful commentary and citations of relevant scholarship.

The second portion, covering the years 1854–1866, takes us into less familiar realms—the early moves toward reorganization in the West at the suggestion of Brigham Young. This is the shortest section, and it captures an interlude of scattered activity before the Relief Society’s formal reorganization. Included selections are limited and somewhat fragmentary: the “Great Salt Lake City Relief Society Minutes, January–June 1854,” for example, seems useful mostly to demonstrate that the organization existed and includes few details about the content of its meetings. Indeed, the lack of detail might challenge even those with Ulrichian abilities to give greater meaning to these minutes. Retrospective accounts of this period also provide important insight into the general activities of these short-lived societies and contribute to our understanding of efforts to conciliate Native Americans, the intense religiosity of the Mormon Reformation, and the events that led up to the Mormon War of 1857–1858. As to the war itself, we gain intriguing glimpses into the mindset of the women of southern Utah through two selections from the Cedar City Relief Society minutes written just before and a few months after the Mountain Meadows Massacre—glimpses that leave us wanting to know more. Perhaps the most interesting selection here is a portion from the History of Joseph Smith regarding the establishment of the Relief Society. Published in the *Deseret News* in September 1855 as part of an ongoing effort to complete what became known as *The Documentary History of the Church*, the material is based primarily on the Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes. Footnotes allow us to compare this version with the minutes themselves, revealing the subtle but significant rephrasing of Joseph’s words to fit the needs, concerns, and understandings of LDS Church leaders at the time in regard to the role of Relief Society women. It was here, for example, that “I now turn the key to you” became “I now turn the key in your behalf” (p. 207).

The third section takes us from 1867—the year Young called Eliza Snow to formally reorganize the Relief Society—to 1879. Here we see the society, guided by the Nauvoo experience (and its now sacred minutes), begin to systematically spread throughout the church. And here we follow the emergence of such familiar activities as retrenchment,

the promotion of home industry, grain storage, and sericulture. Also on view is the rise of the unofficial organ of the society: *The Woman's Exponent*. Mormon women again defended the church against its enemies, gained the vote, and then had to fight to retain it. The editors have made clear that by 1879, when the third section ends, the Relief Society had emerged as a "cohesive, visible, and permanent organization" seen as a vital part of the church's structure (p. 247). This section also reveals the feelings of unity and inclusiveness resulting from these developments. "There is no sister so isolated, and her sphere so narrow," Eliza Snow observed in August 1873, "but what she can do a great deal towards establishing the Kingdom of God on earth" (p. 384). That being said, the Nephi Ward Relief Society Minutes from 1870 remind us that great social and economic divides were coming to separate the sisters as well, with some spheres of action much narrower than others. Retrenchment, for example, necessitated greater adjustments for those living in the more prosperous and increasingly cosmopolitan Salt Lake City than it did in such hard-scrabble communities as Nephi.

The fourth section, covering the years 1880–1892, begins with the creation of a formal governing structure for the Relief Society through Eliza Snow's appointment by John Taylor as its second general president. It then leads us through the society's continued expansion throughout the church, its first general conference, the struggle to defend and then regain the vote for Utah women, and finally the Relief Society's jubilee celebration. An impressive (and largely still relevant) address in this section by Apostle Franklin D. Richards praises the contributions of Relief Society women while chastising men who "don't like to accord [women] anything that will raise them up and make their talents to shine forth" (p. 546). By the Relief Society's jubilee year of 1892, it is clear that the organization had grown so much in membership and its activities so broad in scope that the selections here can at best be seen merely as a general survey.

Rounding out the volume is a handy section containing reference material that includes a useful biographical directory of individuals mentioned in the text, a substantial bibliography, and a thorough index.

On the one level, this book can serve as a comprehensive guide to the uninitiated who wish to develop their expertise in Mormon women's history. But there is so much thought and nuance put into the choice of selections and into the editorial commentary that it also greatly rewards experienced scholars by providing not only a useful reference, but also substantial food for thought. Its biggest problem is that it leaves one wanting more. But of course that is also a potential strength. As the sisters in Nauvoo were encouraged to "provoke the brethren to good works" (p. 31), *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* will provoke both experienced and coming generations of scholars to add to the history of the organization as they closely probe its unpublished ward and stake minutes and search out additional diaries and journals documenting the activities of its members. Who knows what further gems of insight will emerge as a result?

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The history they [Relief Society leaders at the organization's jubilee] presented left out episodes of disconnection and conflict. Instead they emphasized strength, harmony, and continuity. There was a sacred worldview and their narrative of women's efforts told of the hand of God in their achievements. Although the following documents sometimes complicate the narrative of harmony and continuity, they also illuminate how this sacred worldview informed Mormon women's lives in diverse times and places. (*The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, xxxviii)

**SUSANNA MORRILL:** With the above quotation, the editors wrap up the introduction to *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents*

*in Latter-day Saint Women's History*. Published by the LDS Church History Department, this volume is a laudable and impressive achievement. The editors have selected many important and illuminating documents from a rich goldmine of the Relief Society's historical records. They have written concise and clear introductory sections and footnotes that provide context and background information necessary to better understand the selected documents. In so doing, they effectively illuminate in high relief the institutional footprint that women made on the early church. Reading these documents, one gets a female, sometimes ground-level perspective on the constantly shifting terrain of the early LDS community, from the uproar over the suspected practice of polygamy in Nauvoo, to the adjustment to frontier life in the homelands of Native Americans, to the struggle to maintain a distinct identity in the face of cultural and legal pressures in the late nineteenth century. These documents make accessible details of women's roles in navigating, even sparking, these times of transition—and they speak to questions about the priesthood and revelation that today's church leaders and members are still wrestling with.

On the whole, the documents follow the historical narrative laid out by Relief Society leaders at the jubilee celebration of the group. They eloquently tell the institutional history of the Relief Society. The documents describe how the group was organized and later dissolved in Nauvoo, and also how it was reorganized on the local and then central level in Utah. They record the push for retrenchment and the accompanying creation of the YLMIA (later YWMIA). Also detailed are Relief Society members' work on silk production, grain storage, and suffrage, as well as how Relief Society leaders created the Primary Association and networked with national women's organizations. Because the documents follow this script, the first two sentences of the opening quotation aptly describe what the editors have accomplished in gathering and interpreting these documents: a compelling portrait of the strength and continuity of the early Relief Society. In many ways this collection serves as a reader for the monumental history of the Relief Society written by Jill Derr, Janath Cannon, and Maureen Beecher and published in

1992.<sup>1</sup> It offers primary-source depth and detail to the early institutional history of the society.

The editors of *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* introduce some documents that provide complication and counterpoint. They point out that the Nauvoo Relief Society was probably dissolved as a result of the group's work to oppose the introduction of polygamy (pp. 12–15). Included in the collection is a strongly worded statement by Brigham Young criticizing the Relief Society for its perceived interference and even suggesting that the women's opposition to polygamy led to the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith (pp. 168–71). The volume also contains minutes from Native American, Hawaiian, frontier, and foreign Relief Societies (pp. 483–86, 509–13, 553–56, 557–59), offsetting the official narrative with voices outside the Salt Lake City area. These complicating documents invite us to delve deeper into the lived messiness of Relief Society history. They give us hope that even more of these kinds of documents will be discovered, interpreted, and published by these skilled researchers. In these far-flung places, we see institutional ideals meeting reality and becoming the lived religion of Mormon women and men.

Messiness shows up again in documents about women and the priesthood. The editors indirectly address oft-cited passages from Joseph Smith's talks to the Nauvoo Relief Society about women and the priesthood. These are words that drive the debate in the contemporary church over women and the priesthood and that have been the subject of much historical disagreement.<sup>2</sup> Did Smith intend to give the priesthood to women through the Relief Society? Did he turn the key of the priesthood over to women and give them autonomous priesthood authority? The answers remain obscure, as they probably always will.

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1. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Bok, 1992).

2. For an example of a scholar who argues that Joseph Smith intended to give women autonomous priesthood power, see D. Michael Quinn, "Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 365–409.



The editors suggest that Smith was utilizing the Relief Society for many purposes, but chiefly to prepare women for the revised temple rituals that he was introducing to members of his inner circle even before the Nauvoo Temple was completed. Thus, they argue, when Smith talked about turning the key of the priesthood during his Relief Society talks, he was referring to women obtaining priesthood through their endowed and sealed relationships with their husbands (pp. xxix–xxxi). In this assertion, the editors follow the line of explanation on women and the priesthood that was recently released by the church: all endowed members carry the priesthood power, but only men exercise the ecclesiastical office of the priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

These documents, and the discussion of women and the priesthood in particular, reinforce the importance of early LDS Church records in creating religious precedent (or, in Weberian terms, traditional authority) throughout the church's history and up to the present. The editors note repeatedly that the Nauvoo records of the Relief Society served as the foundational documents for the later iterations of the group (pp. xviii–xix). It is no surprise, then, that the Nauvoo records are presented in great detail, whereas the rest of the records are presented in much more selective fashion. The later documents, however, are equally revealing. They speak to a powerful, synergistic partnership between Eliza Snow and Brigham Young in creating today's institutional and historical infrastructure of the church. In particular, they illuminate how important Snow was to creating a sacred Mormon worldview among church members of this era. Snow generated the precedent-setting early records in her role as secretary of the Nauvoo Relief Society. More importantly, perhaps, she served as the authoritative keeper and then interpreter and propagator of these records as the Relief Society was dissolved and re-formed in fits and starts and then fully in Utah. As the nineteenth century neared its end, Snow was a walking and talking sacred story.

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3. "Joseph Smith's Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women," accessed September 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/topics/joseph-smiths-teachings-about-priesthood-temple-and-women>.

Snow's Nauvoo records highlight the long-standing tension within the Mormon community between the authority of foundational sacred experiences or records and the authority of continuing revelation. Should current practice depend mostly on Joseph Smith's statements and teachings? Or, following the belief in continuing revelation, should current practice be based on statements by later prophets of the church who, for instance, on the issue of women and the priesthood clearly stated that women had the priesthood through the marriage relationship with their husbands? In the balance of these two foundational principles of the church, which is more important? This creative tension allows the Mormon community to adjust to new times and circumstances, but it also generates confusion and questions. The church's recent statement on race and the priesthood expresses well this tensional, creative process.<sup>4</sup> The statement claims Joseph Smith did not restrict men of African descent from the priesthood, and it uses his early practices and words as a model for a modern, inclusive church, dismissing later racist priesthood restrictions as influenced by the racism of American culture. Similarly, these Relief Society documents with their heavy emphasis on the Nauvoo records seem to throw the weight in favor of original experiences or practices as the most authoritative.

In the stories told by the documents, the issue gets even more complicated as the thorny question of interpretation weaves its way through the minutes and letters of the Relief Society. The volume begins with what women were saying and doing in the Nauvoo Relief Society and ends with how Mormon women remembered these early organizational moments fifty years later. We see the common pattern among religious groups of invisible, perhaps even unconscious, reinterpretation of authoritative stories. Fifty years hence, for instance, the internal conflict over polygamy that members of the Nauvoo Relief Society once had fanned—thereby opposing the revelatory authority of Joseph Smith—had, by the time of the Jubilee celebration of the Relief Society, disappeared in the telling of those who had personally witnessed those

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4. "Race and the Priesthood," accessed September 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood>.

tensions. Instead, they described a harmonious group of women faithful to the declarations of their prophet: the original experiences reread for a different time when the church was striving to erase the memory of polygamy and forget the disruptions it caused within the church and between the church and other Americans.

In these documents, then, we see a sacred Mormon worldview that was mutable and riven with tensions. We see worldviews that changed through time and that intersected in sometimes reinforcing and sometimes contentious ways. While these documents show some of these tensions—tensions that are the inevitable force of religious creativity—they do not resolve the questions for members or scholars about women and the priesthood, nor do they elucidate on which side the balance of religious interpretation should fall: original impulse or continuing revelation. These questions will remain for each new generation of leaders and members to work out. I suspect, however, that the documents in this volume will contribute mightily to current discussions about women's place in the contemporary church. As they escape the interpretive framing of Snow and their present-day editors, they will serve as fuel to the fire of these debates.

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**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This hefty, impressive volume is a collection of seventy-eight documents that tell the story of the Relief Society from its founding in 1842 to its fiftieth anniversary in 1892. Edited by four expert historians, the volume reprints a wide variety of texts—including the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, letters, articles, diary entries, and official reports—that reveal the crucial importance of the Relief Society to the early history of the Latter-day Saints. The documents are fascinating, and the editors have done a marvelous job of annotating

them. In order to make the volume accessible to a popular readership, the editors have divided the book into four parts, each with its own introduction, and they have included clear, judicious headnotes to each document. They have also provided biographical sketches of the major characters as well as a comprehensive index.

The most riveting part of the book is part 1 (1830, 1842–1845), which reprints the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book. To read these documents is to experience some of the inventiveness and excitement of early Mormon history. When Latter-day Saint women began making plans to create a benevolent society, they soon discovered that Joseph Smith had something more ambitious in mind. He wanted the Female Relief Society (as it was originally known) to be connected to his restoration of the priesthood and the temple.

Much of the drama of part 1 comes from Joseph's fervent sermons to the Relief Society and the tensions between him and Emma over polygamy. In 1842, when the Relief Society was formed, Joseph had already been sealed to several women, and he seems to have hoped that the Relief Society would ultimately defend his revelation about celestial marriage. When the apostate John Bennett attacked Joseph for teaching "spiritual wifery," several women of the Relief Society, including Emma, insisted that the rumors were false. By 1844, however, Emma was determined to resist polygamy, and she helped draft a declaration, "The Voice of Innocence," which censured "debauchees, vagabonds, and rakes" for "bringing woman, poor defenceless woman, to wretchedness and ruin" (p. 153). In response, Joseph blamed the Relief Society for inciting people against him, complaining that he "never had any fuss with these men until that Female Relief Society brought out the paper against adulterers and adulteresses" (p. 153).

Given the conflicts between Joseph and Emma, it is difficult to untangle his personal responses to her from his prophetic vision for the Relief Society. A particularly vexing question is whether he intended to give women the priesthood. This volume reprints six sermons that Joseph delivered to the Relief Society in 1842, and although they have been published before, they are especially powerful when read in the

context of the minute book. On March 31, 1842, Joseph told the society that it “should move according to the ancient priesthood,” and he “said he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests a[s] in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day” (p. 43). On April 28, after explaining that he wanted “to make observations respecting the Priesthood,” he argued that women as well as men could practice the spiritual gifts of “healing the sick, casting out devils &c” (pp. 53, 55). (According to a footnote in the volume, his scribe recorded that Joseph “gave a lecture on the pries[t]hood shewing how the Sisters would come in possession of the privileges & blessings & gifts of the priesthood—& that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick casting out devils &c &c” [p. 53].) Using the word *ordained* in reference to women, Joseph “spoke of delivering the keys to this Society and to the church,” and he defended “the propriety of females administering to the sick by the laying on of hands” for healing (pp. 55–56, 59).

Joseph’s language is so dense and allusive that it can be interpreted in multiple ways, but as this volume makes clear, the future leaders of the church were determined to portray the priesthood as belonging to men alone. Blaming women for the murder of Joseph and his brother Hyrum, Brigham Young suppressed the Relief Society after becoming church president in 1844. In an impassioned speech to the high priests quorum, he asked, “What are relief societies for? To relieve us of our best men—They relieved us of Joseph and Hyrum—that is what they will lead to—I don’t (want) the advice or counsel of any woman—they would lead us down to hell.” Speaking to a meeting of the Seventies, he asserted that women “never can hold the keys of the Priesthood apart from their husband” (p. 171). After Young decided to reorganize the Relief Society ten years later, a group of male leaders (including George A. Smith) printed a revised version of Joseph’s sermons to the Relief Society. They made significant changes to Joseph’s language in order to minimize women’s religious authority. For example, the original records stated, “he spoke of delivering the keys to this Society and to the church,” but the male leaders changed this sentence to “he spoke of delivering the keys of the Priesthood to the church, and said the faithful

members of the Relief Society should receive them in connection with their husbands” (p. 204). In the revised version, the “keys” were delivered only to the church, not to the Relief Society, and women could receive them only through their husbands. The leaders also changed Joseph’s words “I now turn the key to you in the name of God” to “I now turn the key *in your behalf* in the name of the Lord” (emphasis added, p. 207).

One might imagine that LDS leaders would be reluctant to change the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Yet when Heber Kimball heard the new sermon read aloud, he stated that he “liked it better as revised” (p. 199). Since relatively few Mormons had access to the original manuscript, most assumed that Joseph had spoken the exact words that were published in the *Deseret News*. Future Mormon leaders, including Franklin D. Richards in 1888, continued to quote the revised version as if it were authoritative (p. 551).

Nineteenth-century LDS women never claimed to be “priests” in the same way as men, but they exercised significant religious authority. Besides giving charity and devoting themselves to home manufacturing, they spoke in tongues, anointed the sick, offered blessings before childbirth, and performed healings. According to Bathsheba W. Smith, Joseph had wanted to make women “a kingdom of priestesses” (p. xxviii). Eliza Snow was described as “a Priestess in the House of the Lord,” and at the first general conference of the Relief Society in 1889, Zina Young reminded her audience that Joseph had organized the society “after the pattern of the Holy Priesthood” (pp. xxxi, 565). Though LDS women (like men) seem to have been uncertain about Joseph’s understanding of the Relief Society, they treated it as a parallel priesthood, a separate sphere in which they had the authority to perform healings and blessings.

In contrast, male leaders repeatedly asserted that women did not have the priesthood. Following in the footsteps of Brigham Young, John Taylor explained in 1880 that when Joseph Smith “ordained” women, “the ordination then given did not mean the conferring of the Priesthood upon those sisters yet the sisters hold a portion of the

Priesthood in connection with their husbands” (p. 476). In the same year, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained that when women administered to the sick by the laying on of hands or by anointing with oil, “they should administer in these sacred ordinances, not by virtue of the priesthood, but by virtue of their faith in Christ, and the promises made to believers” (p. 489). The volume is filled with statements like these, an indication that male leaders were uneasy about Joseph’s cryptic language. By the early twentieth century, only elders were expected to give blessings or anoint the sick.

Today the church continues to argue that Joseph did not ordain women to the priesthood. In a recent article, “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women,” LDS leaders explain that women exert “priesthood authority” within the temple, but “they are not ordained to priesthood office.”<sup>5</sup> Although the documents in this volume can be read in support of this conclusion, they can also be interpreted in more expansive ways. A key issue involves Joseph’s use of the word *ordain*, which the editors suggest he meant as a synonym for “set apart.” On one hand, most antebellum Americans used the word *ordain* to refer to ministerial ordination, which suggests that Joseph may have meant something stronger than merely being set apart. On the other hand, Joseph invested many words with new meanings, including *keys* and *sealings*.

Whatever Joseph’s intentions (and perhaps he was still in the midst of his own revelatory process), this volume makes it clear that Mormon leaders have been anxious about women and the priesthood ever since his death in 1844.

The women of the Relief Society believed that they had been called to build the kingdom of God on earth, and they administered charity, made their own clothing, collected grain for storage, and fought for women’s suffrage. They also strongly defended polygamy. Though modern-day readers may find it challenging to understand how early

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5. “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women,” accessed September 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/topics/joseph-smiths-teachings-about-priesthood-temple-and-women>.

Mormon women reconciled their belief in women's rights with their support of polygamy, this volume reveals that they truly believed in Joseph's revelation about celestial marriage and that they deeply resented critics who portrayed them as victims of an oppressive system. Persecution only strengthened their faith.

The editors of this collection should be commended for their painstaking labor in assembling such a treasure trove of documents. Although there have been many excellent studies of early Mormon women, this volume represents a major contribution to our understanding of the Relief Society, an essential Mormon institution and one of the oldest women's organizations in the United States.

**Catherine A. Brekus** (PhD, Yale University) is Charles Warren Professor of the History of Religion at Harvard Divinity School and the author of *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America*. She is currently working on a new book, *Chosen Nation: Christianity, Politics, and American Destiny*.