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## In the World but Not of It: Responses of LDS Leaders to the Vietnam War

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# In the World but Not of It: Responses of LDS Leaders to the Vietnam War

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## Introduction:

War has long presented a complicated ethical and pragmatic challenge for all religious authorities. Even as the Vietnam War divided the American public, the LDS apostles seemed to be publicly more united than during any other war in the twentieth century. Although this unusual unity itself deserves to be explored and explained, closer inspection reveals that LDS leaders were more divided than typically appreciated on their interpretations of the meaning and cause of the war, how the war should be resolved, and what role the Latter-Day Saints should play in the solution.

## Findings:

### Four Different Viewpoints of LDS leaders:

#### Ideological Warriors

Ezra Taft Benson (1899-1994)  
& David O. McKay (1873-1970)

#### Beliefs about the world:

- Communism is the world's greatest evil.
- There is a vast worldwide communist conspiracy.
- Civil rights and peace activists are front groups for communists.



#### Solutions for the war:

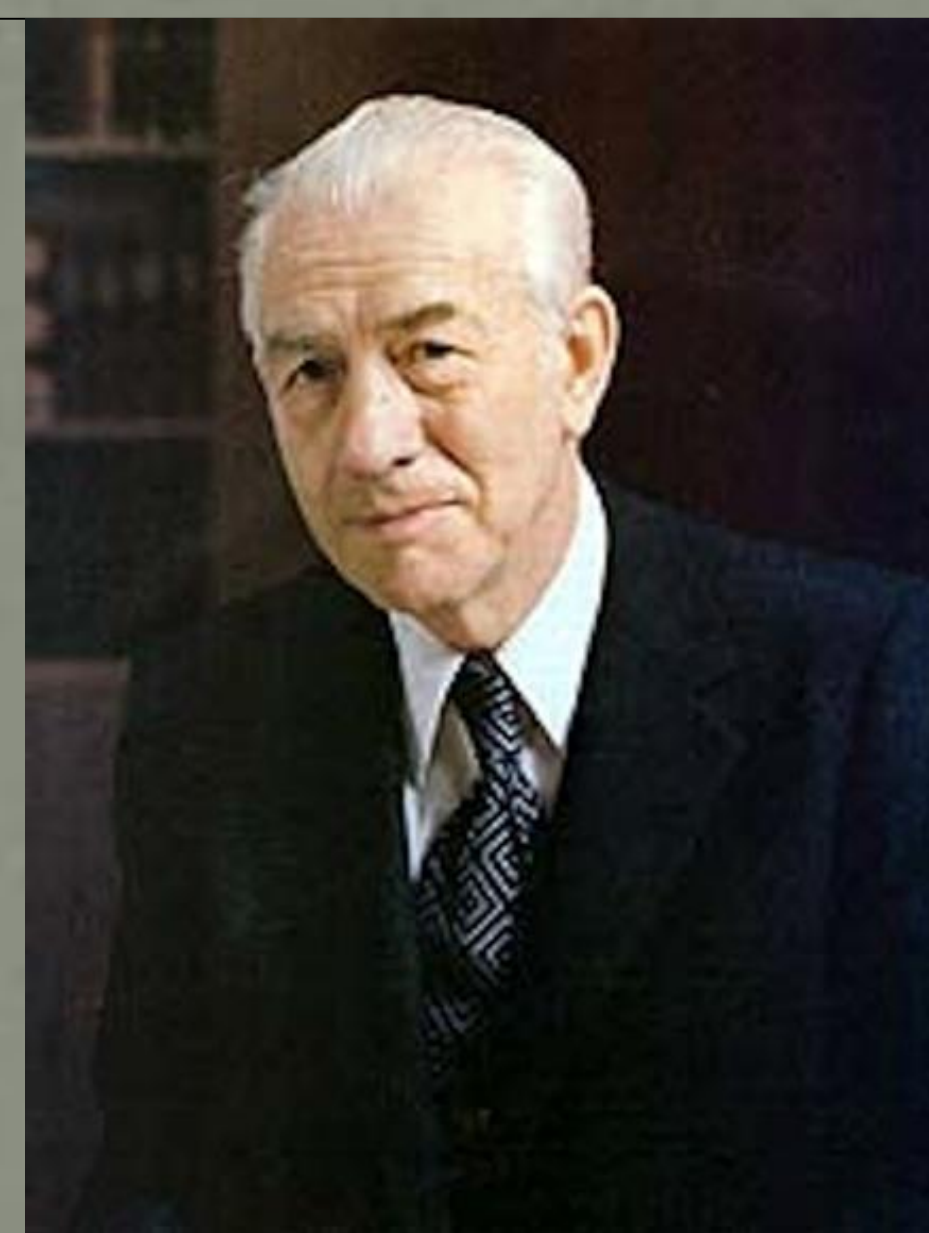
- LDS members should study and identify internal enemies.
- The US should invade North Vietnam and fight China to win total victory in Vietnam.
- LDS members should support the war effort as loyal citizens.

#### Spiritual Revolutionaries

Harold B. Lee (1899-1973)  
& Mark E. Petersen (1900-1984)

#### Beliefs about the world:

- The world's problems cannot be solved by man-made institutions.
- Communism is one of many evils, but not the primary one, so LDS leaders should not talk about it all the time.
- The Vietnam War is a punishment by God on the US for abandoning Christian values.

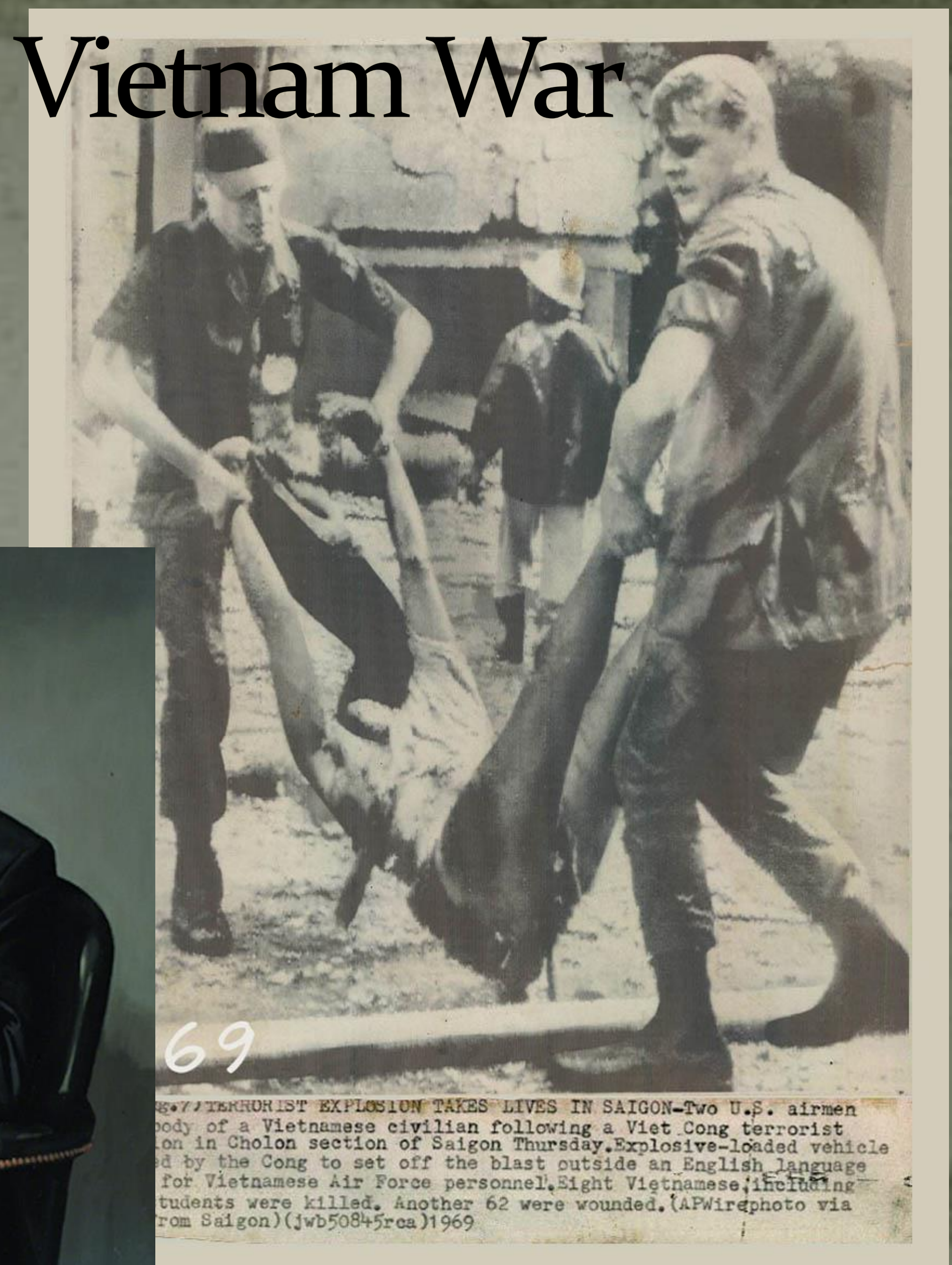


#### Solutions for the war:

- LDS members should focus on preaching the gospel to defeat communism and end all war.
- Correlation of the church and eventually the world is the only way to build Zion and bring peace.
- Reversing secularization in the US will allow God to bless Americans by winning the war.

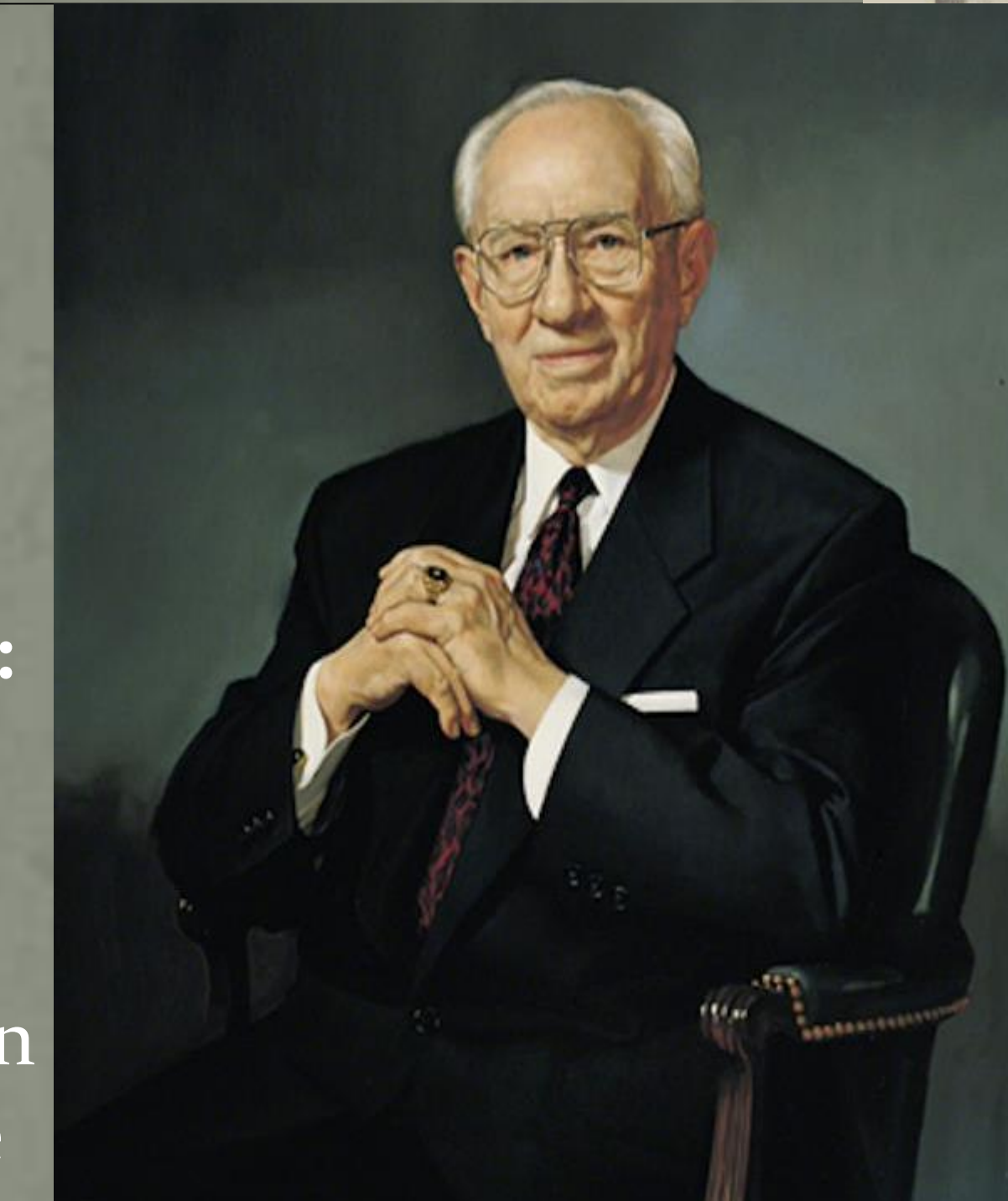
## Conclusion:

The response to war by Latter-Day Saint leaders has long proven to be one of the most revealing markers for how Mormons have seen their place and role in the world. Viewpoints of LDS leaders may be more nuanced and varied than typically believed, as illustrated by these different responses to the Vietnam War.



#### Pragmatists

Gordon B. Hinckley (1910-2008)  
& Joseph Fielding Smith (1876-1972)



#### Beliefs about the world:

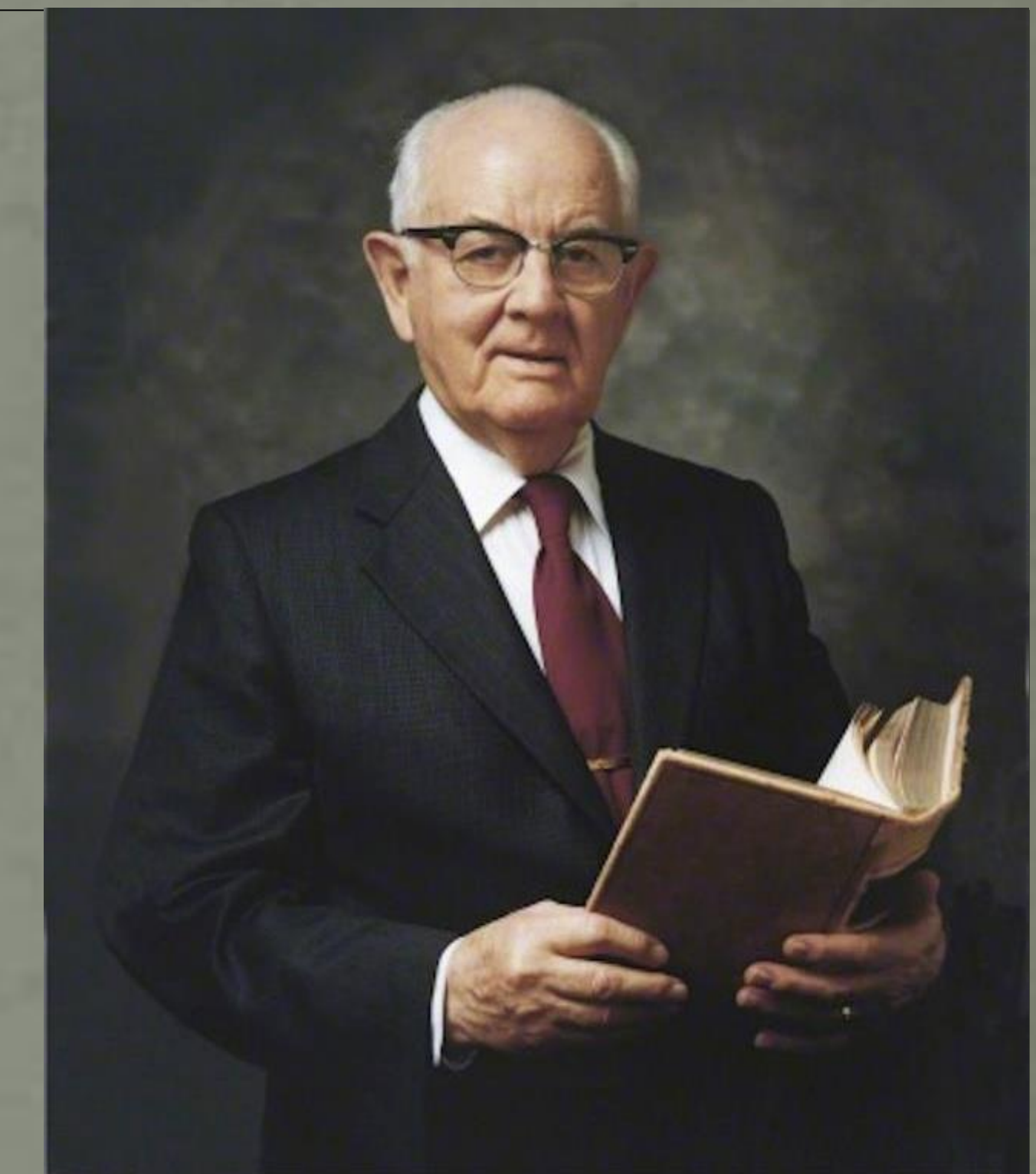
- It is not the Church's role to question the government on war.
- Military involvement in Vietnam will bring the gospel to Southeast Asia.
- Authority is under attack everywhere and must be defended.

#### Solutions for the war:

- LDS members should support the government authorities and trust in their ability to fix the problem.
- Members should not publicly criticize the war because it is disloyal to do so.
- The LDS church should focus on working with the military to protect spirituality of troops and build the church in Vietnam.

#### Pacifists\*

J. Reuben Clark (1871-1961)  
& Spencer W. Kimball (1895-1985)



#### Beliefs about the world:

- War is a terrible evil, and the US should do whatever it takes to avoid it.
- Communism may be evil, but peaceful coexistence is preferable to war.
- Militarism in the United States is a much greater threat to liberty than communism.

#### Solutions for the war:

- Seek diplomatic solutions to achieve peaceful coexistence with communists.
- Sharply curtail military spending and the draft.
- Reduce nuclear weapon stockpiles.

\*Although this viewpoint was well-represented before and after the Vietnam War, it did not have strong advocates during it.