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The 1968 Presidential Decline of George Romney: Mormonism or Politics?

DENNIS L. LYTHGoe*

Beginning with the early nineteenth century, there were prominent fears expressed in the press that Mormons were determined to dominate the country, and even to put one of their own in the White House, where he would institute a national Mormon church-state.¹ It is a little ironic, therefore, that with the dawn of the 1960s, there should actually be a Mormon prominent enough in public life to be seriously considered for the presidency. Yet Romney had been preceded by the first Mormon prophet and founder, Joseph Smith, whose presidential campaign in 1844 was cut short by assassination.²

¹This, together with polygamy, was the basis of persecution and political fears about Mormons in Utah throughout the nineteenth century. Political leaders skeptically viewed Mormons as a religious body with political motivations, and hence statehood was denied Utah until 1896, even though it was originally settled in 1847 and grew rapidly. The seat of the problem lay in the fact that the religious leaders in fact governed Utah in the early days under a church-state system. An old Mormon joke suggests that Brigham Young as President of the Church and Governor of the territory, conducted Church business on one side of his desk in the morning, and civil business on the other side in the afternoon. For an excellent treatment of the problem, see J.D. Williams, “The Separation of Church and State in Mormon Theory and Practice,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Vol. 1 (Summer 1966), 30-54, and the author’s “The Changing Image of Mormonism in Periodical Literature,” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Utah, 1969), 78-135.

Since Smith’s brief campaign was conducted outside the purview of the two-party system and not taken seriously on the national scene, it cannot be judged in the same league as Romney’s very plausible attempt to win the Republican nomination. Though there have been outstanding Mormon political personalities through the years, George Romney was the first since Smith to seriously seek the presidency. With his avowed candidacy in 1968, Romney became indisputably the most prominent Mormon in public life.

While he was initially considered the front runner for the nomination, he withdrew from the race early in the campaign when political polls showed him lagging badly behind Richard Nixon. Many analysts, including Romney himself, have blamed his political decline on his famous “brainwashing” statement made after a tour of Viet Nam in 1968. Actually, a close examination of the popular periodical press during the years of Romney prominence disclose a profound relationship between his religion and his political decline. For that reason, it is valuable to analyze those periodical accounts as they relate to Romney the candidate and Romney the Mormon. Significantly, most of the articles in the popular magazines dealing with Romney treat him with religious implications; admittedly, those are the only ones cited in this study. Although the press un-

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3. The most colorful Mormons in political life were Republican Reed Smoot, an apostle of the Church, who served for thirty years in the U.S. Senate from Utah and became highly influential in national matters; and Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture under Eisenhower, who has become prominent for his right wing political philosophy and connections with the John Birch Society. Deserving of mention are Elbert Thomas, liberal Democratic Senator from Utah and prominent in the New Deal years, and more recently, Wallace Bennett (R-Utah), and Frank Moss (D-Utah). Since Benson, Cabinet members of Mormon background have become common: Democrat Stewart Udall, the liberal Secretary of the Interior under Kennedy and Johnson; and Nixon’s two appointees, conservative David Kennedy, Secretary of the Treasury, and of course, Romney as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

4. Though some have attributed it to a slip of the tongue, Romney suggested upon deplaning that the military and others had given him and other governors a “brainwashing” on an earlier tour of Viet Nam. The controversial phrase was used extensively by the press and other politicians in both attacking and defending Romney’s position. Though under heavy pressure, Romney refused to apologize for the term, believing it to be accurate—even given its prisoner of war connotation. While appearing on the University of Utah campus in 1969 as Secretary of HUD, Romney pointedly blamed the press for distorting his political views during the campaign and causing him to appear ridiculous. He particularly emphasized the brainwashing incident.

5. There are, of course, a few accounts in the magazines completely devoid of the religious connotation. These, however, are usually very brief reports of an event with little interpretation. The “brainwashing” incident is included in this category.
doubtedly displays bias when covering any political candidate, the sampling presented here would hope to be diversified enough to supply valid reasons for Romney's failure. For while the press may markedly influence public opinion, there is ample indication that it reflects it as well. In a very real sense, the periodicals mirror contemporary opinion about important people and events.

THE RISE OF ROMNEY'S NATIONAL IMAGE

Romney's national image skyrocketed from 1958 until 1969 in the national periodicals; Newsweek was the first to treat him in an analysis of Romney the car salesman. Romney had just been elevated to the presidency of American Motors and faced the task of keeping his cars in competition with the larger companies. Noting his success in promoting compact cars and increasing sales, Newsweek claimed he needed two things in great amounts: "hot missionary zeal and vast physical stamina." To illustrate the missionary spirit, they recalled his days as a young missionary in Britain for the Mormon Church, and noted his more recent position as president of the Detroit Stake of the Church, "a position roughly equivalent to bishop in some churches." Romney was characterized as a "devout churchgoer" and as a result he "seizes new projects with fierce dedication and sells the idea with the artistry of a consummate evangelizer." A similar picture was presented by Time in 1959, when it called him a "Bible-quoting broth of a man who burns brightly with the fire of missionary zeal." His speech was said to be couched in "evangelical, organ-like tones" which had helped him immensely in the business world. As he had predicted in 1955, the compact car hit the top of the market through his zeal and salesmanship. Time noted that Romney had been a missionary of one kind or another most of his life; his grandfather was a Mormon who had thirty children by four wives, his father a monogamous Mormon who took the family to

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"Detroit 'Missionary' At Large..." Newsweek, Feb. 24, 1958, 84, 85.
Mexico to escape persecution. In kindergarten in Los Angeles, children reportedly assailed him with the sneering cry of "Mexican!" One day George replied, "Look, if a kitten was born in a garage, would that make it an automobile?" Through such early logic and salesmanship, Romney apparently won the day, and the children stopped bothering him. His first act as President of American Motors was to give the problems "thoughtful and prayerful consideration." His Sundays were said to be exclusively reserved for Church activities, and he said, "My religion is my most precious possession. Except for it, I could easily have become excessively occupied with industry. Sharing responsibilities for church work has been a vital counterbalance in my life."8 Very early, Romney's success was connected closely with his religious devotion.

Romney then dropped from the periodical scene until February, 1962, when his name was mentioned as a prominent contender for the governorship of Michigan. Lauding his "effective" speaking technique, the Nation claimed it to be a result of Mormon missionary experience of speaking on soapboxes. Further, his Mormon membership was an "asset," contributing to his "attractive public image."9 Also making reference to Romney's candidacy, Time called him "a ruggedly handsome man" who neither smokes, drinks (not even tea or coffee) nor swears, and "who gives 10 percent of his annual income (which amounted to $250,000 last year) to his church." Before Romney reached his decision to run, he "fasted for 24 hours in prayerful consideration."10 While watching Romney campaign, Business Week wondered if the presidency would be next; a blonde junior college sophomore allegedly "gazed dreamily" at him as he spoke, and a veteran Republican politician remarked: "That's the way the girls were looking at Jack Kennedy in 1960."11

RELIGION AND THE NEGRO QUESTION

Newsweek speculated a good deal into his presidential chances while recalling the "dramatic" 24 hour fast during which he prayed for "guidance beyond that of man," enabling

him to decide to run for governor. One close friend was quoted as saying, "George's greatest liability is that he's almost too good to be true." With his cuss words limited to "hell" or "damn," the journal concluded that religious dedication came as naturally to Romney as "selling Ramblers." Nevertheless, one of Romney's big problems in the campaign was predicted to be his church's Negro position, interpreted as giving Negroes "second-class citizenship" in the Mormon Church by precluding them from the priesthood. Since Michigan contained some 700,000 Negroes, the issue was thought capable of developing into a heated one. Romney said, "I am against discrimination of any kind, and my record proves it." Newsweek saw one other religious question—that of the possible compromise of the separation of church and state, should the president of a Mormon stake be elected to the governorship, but Romney denied such a problem existed.\(^\text{12}\)

Suggesting that Romney's fast called attention to his Mormon faith, *Time* claimed it had never been a political liability. In Utah such membership was said to be virtually a requirement for political success, and no one expected it to give Romney trouble in Michigan. However, on the national scene, where he was being discussed as a presidential contender, such membership could conceivably hurt him, said *Time*, just as John Kennedy's Catholicism stirred controversy in 1960. "Around Michigan last week the word was being spread that the Mormon Church looks on Negroes as an inferior race, cursed by God." Over the years Mormons had allegedly proselytized all races except Negroes; yet there were said to be some active Negro Mormons, and "all Mormons" supposedly believed that Negroes would be able to eventually shake the curse and attain equal status with other Latter-day Saints.\(^\text{13}\)

The religious issue was reported to be playing its part in the campaign, although the discussion in Michigan centered "irrelevantly around the tenets of the Mormon Church and not on George Romney's own personal feelings about racial minorities." Actually, Romney's record was considered admirable: he had been active in opposition to segregation and prejudice in Detroit, a promoter of civil rights "in every public controversy from race riots to desegregation of the city's industries and


public housing." Said Romney: "I believe that the real issue—if there is to be an issue—is what George Romney feels about bias and discrimination against the Negro. No one can point to any word, act or attitude on my part that involved discrimination or discriminatory feelings."\(^{14}\)

Observing the same controversy, the *Christian Century* noted that the "Mormon past includes a number of historical and dogmatic positions not generally accepted by the middle-class American mainstream." Romney allegedly "demythologized" the Negro position in the Mormon Church by pointing to the *Book of Mormon* which took a more "tolerant" view. But such a stand was thought to be weakened by Romney's reference to his own strong record on civil rights and his declaration that no dogma of his church would interfere with his political responsibilities. The author predicted more about the issue were Romney to become the Republican presidential nominee in 1964, just as Kennedy pledged that his religious affiliation would not effect his political decisions—"in the face of the Synod of Rome's contention that papal competency in faith and morals has political implications." Nixon had supposedly made a similar declaration about Quakers and pacifism. The author bemoaned this kind of assertion, asking if candidates for high office must be "secularists" or deny some of their church's teachings. Perhaps, he stated, the matter would go unnoticed if it were not for the usual exploitation emanating from both sides at the mention of religion.\(^{15}\)

In a tongue-in-cheek reference to Romney's religious beliefs, *Time* covered the Michigan Republican convention's hectic activities. "In deference to teetotaling Mormon George Romney, his aides stuck strictly to sherbet punch" during the affair, but by the end they could probably have used a "real drink."\(^{16}\) The same magazine commented on the significance of Romney's election as governor, saying he won because he gave the appearance of a prophet at a time when Michigan needed one. Using charisma, and "spiritual magnetism that defies pat explanations" he was said to have demonstrated his Mormon belief that individual responsibility and dedication to public service were important qualities. Thus his Mormonism had

\(^{14}\)Ibid.


much to do with the victory, Romney being an "untraditional sort of politician, with a deep sense of divinely guided destiny."  

Interpreting Romney's philosophy of life as a "rigid" one, *Business Week* claimed it was inherited from his Mormon parentage, making it probable that he would not be "at the mercy of every idea that comes along." The following year, 1963, *Time* claimed Romney already had some presidential support in states where Mormon membership was sizeable—Utah, Idaho, California, and "curiously, Hawaii." But Mormonism could also be a "political hobble"—in view of the Church's refusal to admit Negroes to its hierarchy.  

**ROMNEY'S "POUNDING EVANGELISM"**

In 1965 the *New York Times Magazine* made an attempt to analyze Romney in depth and noted his charisma and forceful personality, handsome appearance, impeccable habits (no smoking or drinking, early riser), devotion to family, and "profoundly religious" nature. Yet Romney was said to be "controversial and enigmatic" to professional politicians around the country, many of whom claimed that under the gilt edges he was really "a sanctimonious, intractable, egotistical tyrant." Much of this controversy was attributed to his membership in the Mormon Church, from which much of his philosophy came. Said one friend, "To understand George, you must first of all understand that he is a Mormon. He is a deeply religious person who has a great belief in the individual and the family. For him, each person is a distinct personality and child of God."  

Mormons were said to consider theirs "a practical religion" teaching that the highest happiness could be achieved through the fullest use of "earthly opportunity." Mormons supposedly emphasized self-reliance, individual responsibility and a "gospel of action." As a result, Romney was thought to be a person who could label things as right or wrong more easily than most people. He once explained how he reached a decision:

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18"Romney: Man to Watch for '64," *Business Week*, Nov. 17, 1962, 92-100.
19"This President Thing," *Time*, Vol. 81 (June 14, 1963), 27.
"Once you have searched out the facts and have prayed and have reached a point where you think you have an answer to the question you are undertaking to resolve, then the third step is to be believing. That means to believe that the decision you have made is the right one, and to put everything you've got into carrying it out." Romney reportedly believed the "Lord meant him to be a leader" and his was a sacred obligation to carry it out. Nevertheless, critics described his approach to politics as sanctimonious; a typical joke during the 1964 campaign told of the governor and an aide emerging from a hotel. "Beautiful day, Governor," remarked the aide. "Thank you," the governor replied. Suggested one of his Democratic opponents, "He actually believes that what he does is not only moral, but divinely ordained. He believes that anyone who criticizes him after he has reached a conclusion is a disciple of the devil." In reference to the presidency, a friend said Romney had not yet decided to run. "I don't want to be sacrilegious, but I don't think that at this point God has yet said to him: 'George, get going boy!'" 21

Later in the year, *Time* noted that even Romney's worst critics would admit that he had a "way with words." His list of "disturbing national problems" allegedly included "the decline in religious conviction, moral character and wholesome family life. This threatens us most." 22 Clearly, Romney was speaking from his Mormon philosophy of life and readily applying it to politics.

The journals became more critical of Romney in 1966, as *Time*, for instance, evaluated one of his speeches as a "blend of old-fashioned Midwestern isolationism and the liberal's equally irrelevant preoccupation with world opinion." Even on Viet Nam, Romney had trouble offering specific solutions. He was considered more convincing when he utilized his Mormon background and "moralized" about what he believed to be the nation's most pressing problem, "the disintegration of the American family." In Cleveland he told his fellow governors that "there has been a decline in the faith, belief and principles on which America was built." The solution he saw was "personal responsibility, family responsibility, and private institutional responsibility—and the place to start is in the home."

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21 Ibid., 29, 73-76.
Romney was heard to stress that he was "as conservative as the Constitution, as progressive as Teddy Roosevelt, and as liberal as Mr. Lincoln." But, said the author, he still needed to demonstrate "unequivocally which Romney is for real." 23

Again characterizing Romney as an evangelist, Newsweek said he regularly involved audiences with "fervent appeals to the American conscience." 24 And the National Review, the conservative journal, called him "long on energy" but "short on logic" as he continued to appear as a "crusader" not sure where his "mission" to lead his fellow citizens really lay. 25 George Romney was what Richard Nixon had tried unsuccessfully to be—the "all-American boy," said the Atlantic. Romney's "pounding evangelism" and honesty supposedly made Americans think he represented what they wanted—a politician who was "above politics." His Mormon religion was characterized as "not universally popular," with the Church's "conservative stand on the racial issue" being potentially dangerous. 26

U.S. News and World Report traced Romney's Mormon activity as a stake president, his abstinence from tea, coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes, his tithes to the Church, and his avoidance of political activity on Sunday. He was pictured as a "family man" who believed deeply in the value of prayer for solving problems. This seemingly indicated, as Romney himself affirmed, that he was "completely the product of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Noting the "theological doctrine" in Mormonism on the Negro, the author suggested its connection to Romney's political beliefs. Though Romney reportedly said he did not subscribe to the doctrine, 27 his subsequent comments indicate an interpretation of that doctrine, rather than a disavowal. "My Church teaches me the Negro is my brother, and that the Negro can attain the celestial kingdom, just as I can," he said. At a news conference, Romney continued, "All of us are equal as children of God, and equal citizens, and I accept this without reservation." 28

28 Ibid.
Carefully examining Romney's devotion to his church, the 
*Ladies Home Journal* concluded that it was very important 
in his political development. Though most did not suspect, it 
suggested, Romney was formerly "painfully shy," and hung his 
head in public even as student body president of his high 
school. But after spending two years as a missionary for the 
Mormon Church in Britain, where he rang doorbells and held 
street meetings for converts, he allegedly developed a strong 
sense of self-confidence. Often when signing autographs he 
would leave an "inspirational message" such as "Search diligently, be believing and all things will work together for 
your good," or "Pursuit of the difficult makes men strong." 
The author wondered if Romney was a "leader in tune with 
some kind of new spirit of the troubled '60s—or is he just old 
fashioned?" When Mrs. Romney was asked if this was corny, 
she responded pleasantly, "I think it's kind of cute."29

The *Saturday Evening Post* featured a descriptive article by 
Stewart Alsop in October:

People who dislike Lyndon B. Johnson say that he 
"looks like a Mississippi riverboat gambler." People who dis-
like Richard M. Nixon ask "Would you buy a used car from 
this man?" These two scurrilous political cliches are a measure 
of the importance of personal appearance in the television age. 
They also suggest an important reason why George Romney, 
Governor of Michigan, has an excellent chance of being the 
Republican presidential candidate in 1968. No one has ever 
said that Romney looks like a riverboat gambler—he looks 
more like a well-preserved Horatio Alger hero. And you 
would buy a secondhand car from Romney with happy con-
fidence. . . . The appearance of the man, the impression he 
gives, the earnestness, sincerity and just plain goodness which 
Romney fairly exudes, are vital assets.30

The author also noted that because of Mormonism, Rom-
ney believed that his body was "the temple of the Spirit," ex-
plaining why his "spiritual temple is remarkably well-maint-
tained." He was said to neither smoke nor drink, exercised 
regularly, usually in the early morning hours on the golf 
course, and looked five years younger than President Johnson, 
although a year older. "George Romney is also an intensely

29Ernest Havemann, "The George Romney Family: All Abroad for the 

30Stewart Alsop, "It's Like Running Against God," *Saturday Evening Post*, 
moral man." Talking of his religious commitment, a past opponent for the governor's chair, Zoltan Ferency opined, "It's like running against God." When Romney was elevated to the presidency of American Motors, one of the more practical executives purportedly asked him what would save the company. Without hesitation, Romney replied, "God—God always helps decent people who are trying to do the right thing."\(^{31}\) Obviously, Romney's religion consistently applied directly to all aspects of his life. *Business Week* expressed the opinion that Romney's "dedication to morality—a strength—could turn out to be a weakness in some quarters. Some think he preaches too much, that the open display of piety could have adverse effects."\(^{32}\)

The editors of the *New Republic* made the following pointed comments:

> We watched George Romney interviewed on TV the other day; a fine looking, square jawed man who is handsomer than Ronald Reagan. We have always liked Romney and had doubts about him. Some Washington writers have all but given him the G.O.P. presidential nomination already. Well, we shall wait. A dose of wineless, tobacco-less Puritanism in the White House would certainly be a novelty—a Sabbatarian who prays, and fasts, with a hot line to Heaven as well as Moscow, a kind of political Billy Graham. One of the many jobs of a President is to be a Ceremonial High Priest, and Governor Romney could perform this function admirably.\(^{33}\)

**ROMNEY ACCUSED OF A VAGUE STAND ON POLITICAL ISSUES**

Romney was further observed as a man sincere in his piety, yet moving "in an aura of evangelical vagueness." Supposedly, he took a firm stand favoring open housing for Negroes, and added that each person was "a child of God." As Woodrow Wilson indicated while president, piety could be associated with inflexibility. The editors wondered if Romney had those qualities rather than those of the politician—which were said to include the ability to compromise and "achieve the possible."\(^{34}\)

\(^{31}\)Ibid.


\(^{34}\)Ibid.
Describing a conference between Nelson Rockefeller and Romney in Puerto Rico, Newsweek noted that Romney's performance suggested he still had much to learn about politics. The magazine reported an "internal dispute raging over his image." William Scranton and other moderates allegedly thought Romney should "soft-pedal his piety and concentrate on honing his positions." One observer said, "He's been told to cut down the spiritual bit. He can't get away with stuffing his holier-than-thou attitude down the throats of the voters. They'll gag on it by '68." But Romney and his associates reportedly disagreed and felt he had to appear as what he was: "a spiritually oriented, decent businessman who has spent his life as a family man and one who can exert a moral force because it is not feigned but comes from inside."35

The National Review blasted Romney about his letter of explanation for not supporting Barry Goldwater for the presidency in 1964, calling it a "blend of sanctimony, social history, and analysis, all of it self-serving." Romney allegedly claimed Goldwater appealed to segregationists because of an emphasis on states' rights. It would also be possible, suggested the author, to reason that to favor Mormonism was to favor "the congenital and perpetual inferiority of the black race, a little dogmatic problem within Governor Romney's church which he is overdue in reconciling with his political faith."36 It could be readily seen that the Mormon Negro position was one which continually confronted Romney's political hopes, regardless of his response. Finally, in 1966, Newsweek described the "evangelical" Romney's campaign style: "outspoken and opaque, impressively self-assured and relentlessly self-righteous, an activist but also a sermonizer." He was seen selling his brand of politics with the same "shoot from the heart fervor" that won him success in the compact car market, but he still looked "less than presidential."37

In 1967, Harper's characterized Romney as a family man and "tireless champion of moral uplift," and the "closest thing" to an Eisenhower to yet appear on the American political scene. "If Romney sounds increasingly like the peace-unity-and-moral-purity candidate that Eisenhower was in 1952, why, so much the better." Romney was thought "merchandisable" as a can-

1968 Presidential Decline

didate, and was reported to believe unhesitatingly in prayer. His standard speech to women, in which he talked about the "gravest threats to the future of our country—the decline in religious conviction, moral character, and family life—and, yes, the derogation of virginity in the future mothers of America," always thrilled them, asserted the author. The "simple goodness" of "this latter-day Puritan" were considered perfect for his candidacy. "The religious missionary and the successful salesman are essentially mirror images; each has something to sell and . . . its superior merits are never in doubt."\(^{38}\)

If Romney had reached the White House, he may well have been the first president to have delivered a soapbox speech in Hyde Park, suggested the author. He further believed that the Mormon Negro position would give Romney little trouble in a national campaign, because his own advanced position on civil rights would insulate him against attack. Moreover, most Americans were thought less familiar with Mormonism than with John Kennedy's Catholicism. As a side issue, cynics in Salt Lake suggested that Romney's candidacy could spur "Divine revelation" to end the Negro doctrine in the Mormon Church. Romney reportedly had a "Messiah complex" to contend with, readily associating his own purposes with those of God and regarding any opposition as unreasonable. Because of his self-discipline, he was said to sometimes find release in a "temper with a very short fuse." Some Michigan Democrats called it a "nearer-my-God-to-Thee complex" and one even said, "It's all right for George to want to be president, but I object to his using the White House as a stepping stone."

Does the nation want as chief executive a super-salesman in a white Rambler with the predestinarian faith of John Foster Dulles, a man whose favorite song is Sigmund Romberg's "Stouthearted Men," and whose credo is—we can because we believe? If America is yearning once again for that old-time religion, George W. Romney is ready and has the faith.\(^{39}\)

Pertaining to Mrs. Romney and the Mormon Negro position, The Christian Century rendered an outspoken editorial. It was clear, they said, that the problem illustrated discrimination


\(^{39}\)Ibid.
imputing inferiority to Negroes. Newsweek noted Romney’s “quick if not direct” response to the Salt Lake Ministerial Association’s request that he disclaim his church’s stand on the Negro. He refused to “inject the Church into public affairs” and pointed to his own enviable record in civil rights, but his interrogator was not impressed. In contrast to his vague position on Viet Nam, Life reported Romney open and frank with the Ministerial Association. “If my church prevented me as a public official from doing those things for social justice that I thought right, I would quit the church. But it does not.” Purportedly, thirty-five percent of Michigan’s Negro voters supported his re-election to the governorship in the last campaign. Newsweek thought less of the same confrontation, claiming Romney handled the issue less adroitly than did John Kennedy his own problem regarding Catholicism in 1960.

The Reporter observed that Romney was in search of another speech writer to put more “zip and substance” into his remarks which were suffering from “an excess of righteous generalities and appeals to higher morality.” Time pressed Romney to prove his religious beliefs would not influence his political decisions. In spite of a progressive civil rights record, he still supposedly had to demonstrate to most Negroes that he did not share his church’s traditional belief that Negroes were cursed.

Running a feature story on Romney in May of 1967, Life included many facets of the man and his religion. A young Romney aide frankly admitted being converted to Romney’s religion “mainly because he outran me.” Richard Headlee was walking along a corridor in Detroit’s auditorium one day, feeling twenty-five years younger than the governor, but “ended up in near geriatric collapse.” “There was this Polish band there. He grabbed my wife, Mary, and started polka-ing with her. Then he shook hands with all the kids. And then he went out and delivered a speech. I was still sitting there panting. I figured I had to do something.” Purportedly, Headlee was

63 “Romantic Interlude,” Newsweek, Vol. 69 (March 6, 1967), 34.
visited by two Mormon missionaries who offered to pray with him to help him give up smoking; he eventually joined the Church and was still "flabbergasted" by Romney’s stamina.\textsuperscript{46}

Romney allegedly delivered a sermon in a Mormon meeting, with "evangelical fervor," making it clear where the seat of his belief lay. His missionary experience was said to have given him confidence and taught him to handle hecklers, which he still did well, "suddenly flaring out as if he were back on the streetcorner." Still considered by Mormons to be one of the great missionaries of the Church, Romney reportedly rated high achievement as Detroit stake president. The present stake president, Edwin Jones, ascribed "somewhat awesome powers" to the man: "Miraculous things happen to him. We believe that we have the right to place our hands upon the heads of those who are sick, and anoint them with oil. One boy in particular, who had Polio, made a very startling recovery after George participated in the blessing."\textsuperscript{47}

RELIigious Fundamentalism

Accused of claiming a "direct pipeline to God" because of his habit of praying about major decisions, Romney replied it was something "any human being can follow," related the author. Romney further referred to the Constitution as "divinely inspired," suggesting the Mormon belief that America was singled out by God for special blessings. His "religious fundamentalism touches day-to-day American democracy" and the two would seem not to conflict since he saw his religion and his country as a "single mythic heritage." Though Romney allegedly believed in separation of church and state and agreed with the Supreme Court decision against "state-prepared prayer," he nevertheless was said to believe strongly in spontaneous prayer. His mind, then, was supposedly not captive, but devout. Although he considered himself a servant of God, noted the author, he would never be an instrument of the Mormon Church, for he believed himself a free agent—another belief compatible with Mormonism. He reportedly made his disagreements pointedly with ultra-conservatives Ezra Taft Benson and his son, Reed, a John Birch Society representative.


\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 88, 89.
And though accepting his Church's theological position on the Negro, he was believed to have done more perhaps than any other Republican to further civil rights.\textsuperscript{48}

The \textit{New York Times Magazine} described a Romney appearance at Dartmouth College, where he was greeted by heckling placards saying "God is alive and thinks He's George Romney," and "George is the Biggest Thing Since the Edsel," "He Stands for (1) Motherhood, (2) America, and (3) A Hot Lunch for Orphans." The Dartmouth Five had greeted him playing the predictable "When the Saints Come Marching In." Allegedly, some of the most poorly educated Negroes had indicated their awareness of the Mormon practice. For instance, a Negro "teenybopper" in San Francisco said to her boyfriend: "That Romney, he's a pretty cool Governor." The answer was, "He belongs to a church where YOU ain't got no soul."\textsuperscript{49}

In Atlanta, a Negro woman asked Romney how he could feel comfortable in the Mormon Church, but he reportedly had no real answer. His church may have been troublesome in the racial areas, claimed the author, but it was very helpful in the "long, tough political haul." "The impromptu speech in which Romney is most completely at ease is the inspirational appeal, with its stress on the divinely inspired nature of American government and the sure ability of every individual to achieve happiness and success through faith and good works." Mrs. Romney was thought very protective of the governor, and supposedly criticized the press when they ran what she felt were prejudicial stories on him; and once at a cocktail party she "deftly swept Romney's glass out of his hand at the approach of a photographer, despite the fact that it contained a good Mormon drink, ginger ale."\textsuperscript{50}

Covering the formal announcement by Romney of his candidacy for the presidential nomination, \textit{Newsweek} called it a "preachy ten-minute statement," in which he talked against big government, unfulfilled promises to the poor, a war with no visible end, and the "growing aimlessness and flabbiness" of the American nation. What Americans needed, he said, was "leadership worthy of God's blessing."\textsuperscript{51} Even his formal an-

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 89-92.


\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., 138.

nouncement was tinged with his religious devotion. *Christianity Today* commented on the announcement favorably, saying it coincided with his known religious views, including the separation of church and state. However, concluded the author, it was "sad that most Americans are eager to minimize the religious issue in public life precisely at a time when our national history most clearly bears the marks of a great religious crisis."32

The conservative *National Review* stressed the importance of Mormonism as a pervasive part of Romney's life. Should he be the Republican nominee, he would be the "most avowedly religious candidate since the fundamentalist Bryan last ran in 1908." Romney had said strongly, noted the author, that no training, college or otherwise, would substitute for his religious training. He was said to regard marriage as sacred; thus, when Nelson Rockefeller's marriage ended in divorce, relations between the two men threatened to cool. Gus Scholle, President of the Michigan AFL-CIO, allegedly thought the fasting and prayer to decide whether to run for governor was a "phony stunt," since son Mitt had reportedly told the *Detroit News* that his dad had decided to run at dinner before the fast began. This story supposedly dashed the "apocalyptic effect" of God telling him to run. In spite of his church's Negro stand, Romney seemed to have a good appeal from Negroes and a healthy record in civil rights. However, his grasp of major issues was felt to be decidedly weak; "the fundamentalist aspects of his religion may have rubbed off on a fundamentalist view of political philosophy." One man probed at the governor's complexities, claiming Romney's biggest weakness was that he had no vices.33

For a nation wedded to the consumer economy, to planned obsolescence, and to the salesmanship of Alexander Botts, Romney's evangelical aggressiveness may hit the people right in their revival tents . . . If his pitch catches on, he might make it yet; and the country could anticipate the January day when all Texans leave the White House, and the Saints come marching in.34

Romney received a cool treatment from the press on his

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34 Ibid., 1400.
Viet Nam trip; Time observed his tendency to "lecture the troops" wherever he went, "even to preach." Speaking of the divinity of Christ to both Christians and non-Christians, he appealed for "stoical acceptance of death on the battlefield." At Christmas dinner at Cu Chi he reportedly made a "sermonette" saying, "We have to lose ourselves for others. Some have to lose lives young and some when we are older." After hearing him speak, one Negro marine asked dryly: "Is the Governor letting Negroes into his church yet?" The same magazine evaluated his progress in the campaign in New Hampshire by quoting one slogan:

The wind atop Mount Washington is singing "Romney's right!"
The waves that wash New Hampshire's shores are roaring "Romney's right!"
George Romney's right for our country now, we need a man today
Who's tough enough to do what's right, and man enough to pray.

But "pray as he might," Romney was far behind Richard Nixon in the polls, as the "need to do right" became as urgent as this campaign anthem. Nevertheless, Romney supposedly ordered only 1,000 bumper stickers, and a few hundred "psychedelic posters" that pictured him "glowing with an inner purple light."

On the stump, said Time, Romney continued his "perfervid moralizing" by emphasizing the importance of discipline to children and holding families together. People were reportedly listening to him preach against "godlessness, immorality, sloth, and the decline of the family." In some speeches he apparently listed what he termed the nation's six "declines: religious conviction, moral character, quality of family life, the principle of individual responsibility, patriotism, and respect for law."

When Romney withdrew from the race because of Nixon's commanding lead, the New Republic had some observations.

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57 Ibid.
Said the editors, "We have never found his evangelical righteousness easy to take but have always liked the man." They noticed that there was an amazing contrast between Romney's withdrawal and the November day in 1962 when Richard Nixon announced "in an embarrassing, whining denunciation of the press" that it would be his "last press conference . . . you won't have Nixon to kick around any more." After his announcement, Romney took questions and made his first reply with a chuckle, "No, this will not be my last press conference."61

In a sentimental final tribute to Romney, The Saturday Review characterized him as "an also-ran" who had "guilelessly" admitted being brainwashed in Viet Nam, his difficulties mounting with the Detroit riots. Perhaps even his church "led inevitably to the moment of truth when in a lonely motel room he decided to withdraw his candidacy." He reportedly believed in being "our brother's keepers—his ideas and way are derived from his religious faith." His Mormonism was further assessed as a personal thing helping to nurture his belief in a "do-it-yourself" organization concept. Romney apparently had deep concern for the Negro, seeing him as "the last pioneer battling a closed frontier." "In all this Romney has shown courage . . . one hopes that conscience and talents and dedication of this man may yet be utilized by his party and his country."62

CONCLUSION

Significantly, the literature indicated no panic at the prospect of a Mormon in the White House, as there would have been at the turn of the century; nor was the matter of the separation of church and state a discernible problem. There were, however, three serious roadblocks to the Romney candidacy: (1) his vagueness on the issues, (2) the Negro doctrine of the Mormon Church, and (3) his piety. In a greater part of the literature, he was chided for failure to meet issues squarely, or to suggest specific solutions to major national problems. Particularly was this observed with respect to Viet Nam, about which Romney changed his position periodically. Reporters came to believe that he did not have deep enough knowledge of the national scene, especially foreign affairs, to handle him-

self effectively on the political stump. "Brainwashing" was of course the classic example. Increasingly, he appeared to the press as a bumbling candidate clearly unprepared for a job as massive as the presidency.

His church affiliation was unquestionably detrimental since the Negro doctrine made him appear less credible in matters of race. Because of the Mormon position, some listeners remained unconvinced by his expressions of concern for complete racial equality. Others were happy to accept this reasoning at face value and judge him only on his record. Nevertheless, in an era when civil rights was one of the major political and social issues, the Mormon position was a huge handicap. It created conflict throughout the campaign, because even people who tended to believe him on this issue wondered about his competency in others. They were disturbed that he would espouse a seemingly discriminatory church, when he himself was a progressive. It made them question the strength of his character and potential performance in tight situations. Surprisingly enough, the Negro issue did not reach the proportions many had predicted, but it undoubtedly would have been more serious had Romney won the nomination.

Romney's principle problem seemed to be his piety, the somewhat abstract concept that he was "too good to be true." Though he and many of his associates thought his wholesome, spiritual image an asset in the early days of the campaign, it began to give him serious trouble as the critical test drew near. The issue perhaps even hastened the end. His habit of appearing as a "preachy" candidate with a definite "Messiah complex" began to damage him badly. Even though politicians like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were battle-scarred, people were nevertheless uneasy about electing a man as religious as Romney. They worried that his principles and idealism would prevent compromise, in the inflexible Woodrow Wilson tradition.

Moreover, since the Mormon Church operates principally with a lay clergy, Romney closely resembled a professional minister seeking the presidency. Even the idealistic Wilson and the evangelistic William Jennings Bryan were not as committed or involved in a church as was Romney. In Romney's

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63For a more complete treatment of this doctrine, see the author's "Negro Slavery and Mormon doctrine," Western Humanities Review, Vol. 21 (Autumn 1967), 327-338.
position as stake president, he was a spiritual leader and preached sermons from the pulpit to his Mormon congregation. Since he operated in a dual capacity—church leader and businessman—for many years, it was not surprising that he would develop an evangelistic quality of speaking. Beyond that, the Mormon Church involves its members in numerous activities and meetings through the week, besides the regular Sunday meetings. As a result, Mormons are more deeply involved in their church than people of many other denominations and often exude a certain religious commitment. Additionally, the Church’s practice of sending young men to serve two years as missionaries in various parts of the globe usually increases their religious devotion as well as their ability to express it. Having shared in that experience, Romney’s demonstration of piety is not unusual.

Though he initially projected a clean, attractive image, Romney seemed not to represent the average American voter. Through his religious devotion, he began to appear too formidable for identification with the masses. While Johnson and Nixon had faults, as did most Americans, Romney appeared disconcertingly flawless. The fear that he believed himself to be divine and therefore incapable of error produced new frustration in the voters. The public failed to appreciate piety, and the more Romney moralized, the more distant the audiences grew. As the press astutely observed, he was much more convincing when discussing family life and morals than when he turned to Viet Nam. With Romney resembling an evangelizer of the Billy Graham variety more than a down-to-earth, believable presidential candidate, Richard Nixon’s image correspondingly improved. In contrast to Romney, even Nixon’s loser reputation seemed welcome.

The campaign did demonstrate that a Mormon could be seriously considered for national office without a specter of fanaticism. Yet Romney’s religion proved to be a handicap and had a profound effect on the campaign’s outcome. It indicated

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64Romney was stake president until elected to the governorship of Michigan, at which time he resigned as stake president, and moved from Detroit to the state house in Lansing. A stake president directs the affairs of approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Mormons. Serving under him are bishops of several wards, with 300 to 600 members in each. The Church has approximately three million members throughout the world and is directed centrally by the General Authorities, comprising the Prophet, his counselors, 12 apostles and several other officers headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah.
a Mormon vulnerability in national politics—that of civil rights. But the peculiarly Mormon problem of Negroes and the priesthood was not nearly as important as sheer piety. For the reaction of the public clearly suggested that any candidate relying heavily on piety, be it Mormon or any other faith, could have serious credibility problems. Perhaps Romney’s major liability was not necessarily Mormonism, but rather religious dedication. Conceivably, a candidate of another faith could be faced with a similar problem; or a Mormon better able to compartmentalize his faith and his politics might erase that problem. But George Romney’s politics and his piety were inseparable, and the damage was more than his presidential aspirations could withstand.