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Colonel Thomas L. Kane on Mormon Politics

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When the Thirty-first Congress met in December of 1849, a major item to be considered was the organization of ter-
ritorial or state governments for the area acquired from Mexico by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848). Mexican settlements of long standing in present-day New Mexico and California were thereafter under the jurisdiction of the United States. The Gold Rush of ’49 brought a large influx of United States citizens into California, who immediately established a government west of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and sought admittance into the Union as a state.

The Mormons, who settled in the Great Basin portion of Upper California, at first met the civic needs of their society with a theocratic government. A number of problems arose, however, which prompted a move to organize a regular civil government. On January 6, 1949, the Council of Fifty, the legislative body of the theocracy, selected John M. Bernhisel as a lobbyist to go to Washington, D.C., to petition Congress for a territorial government. Later in the spring, a civil government called the “State of Deseret” was organized, and on July 5, 1849, the General Assembly elected Almon W. Babbitt as the delegate to Congress. The prime objective of both men was to get statehood for Deseret.

Deseret statehood, however, was imperiled by the national controversy over slavery; a variety of charges, including disloyalty and sedition, leveled against the Mormons by their opponents, among which was a petition to President Zachary Taylor from William Smith, the Prophet’s brother; and rumors prompted by polygamy that the Mormons were involved in immorality, licentiousness, and debauchery.

The Compromise of 1850 admitted the State of California into the Union as a free state, but included only an “Act to establish a Territorial Government for Utah.” Why? There were many contributing factors, but Colonel Thomas L. Kane believed the “improper conduct” of the representative of Deseret hurt the cause of Deseret statehood. Even though Kane and Babbitt were both Democrats, the colonel was unimpressed with the delegate from Deseret. Conversely, he was highly pleased with the “modest good sense and careful purpose to do right” of Dr. Bernhisel, who conducted his personal and public affairs with “upright deportment and gentlemanly demeanor. . . .”

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1Letter of Thomas L. Kane to the Mormon leaders, September 24, 1850, as found in the “Journal History of the Church” in the Church Historian’s Office.
In his letter of September 24, 1850, to the leaders of the Church, Kane offered some sage advice on Mormon political activities in that day:

I have just returned from Washington, where I was called . . . to use my influence with Mr. Fillmore in favor of the nominations for Utah. . . . Until Deseret is admitted into the Union, I would not be thought exacting as to the qualification of her Representative, but he should at least be of correct deportment, discreet, and of good report, that those who point to him and say, "there goes a Mormon," may find marked their approval of his religion. The Delegate, as sort of ambassador, is commonly taken as the specimen man of his constituency; if he cannot do good, if he is either ashamed of his religion, or a shame to it, he can do much harm. In politics, too, . . . he should at all events be a man whose instincts will teach him to be a trusty supporter of his single party and nice in his choice of the associates that belong to it. Otherwise, he will have personal influence with neither party, and gain not strength but only dependency from the relations he cultivates. . . .

Mormon elders who seek responsible positions of public trust and Mormon voters who want their culture as well as their political needs well represented should find these words of Thomas L. Kane not only historically interesting but currently appropriate.