

The Civil War Years In Utah: The Kingdom Of God And The Territory That Did Not Fight

Spencer McBride

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Review

McBride, Spencer

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Maxwell, John Gary *The Civil War Years in Utah: The Kingdom of God and the Territory That Did Not Fight*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806149110

Were Brigham Young and the Mormons Confederate Sympathizers?

Historians do it all the time: they write about the American Civil War without any mention of Utah Territory. This is not necessarily an unreasonable omission. Depending upon who you ask, Utah's importance in the actual prosecution of the war between the Union and the Confederacy ranges between marginal and non-existent. No battles were fought within the territorial boundaries between the two belligerent forces and the Mormon cavalry company that patrolled the western telegraph lines completed their assignment without a single casualty.

Still, if you look beyond the immediate logistics of the war between north and south—that is, if you look west—then territories such as Utah figured prominently into the war's myriad objectives. After all, establishing control over the political, economic, and social development of the western territories was a significant objective for Abraham Lincoln and other Union leaders in the sectional struggle that culminated in the war. Yet, even when historians consider the importance of the western territories in the Civil War, Utah still stands out. Its white population was largely comprised of Mormon men and women who had just over a decade earlier settled in the area as they fled the United States, a country they felt had denied them their rights to worship according to the dictates of their own consciences. When the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo placed the Mormons once more within the geographical jurisdiction of the United States government, tension and distrust characterized the relationship between federal officials and the Mormons' leader, Brigham Young. Thus, when war erupted at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, Utah's loyalty to the Union was uncertain.

In his book, *The Civil War Years in Utah*, John Gary Maxwell examines the impact Utah had on the Civil War and, in turn, the impact the Civil War had on Utah. Maxwell argues that “the Society of Saints [Mormons] contributed almost nothing to the preservation of national unity and the abolition of slavery,” and that Utah’s Mormons “were equipped, ready, and willing to engage in open warfare against the territory’s parent government from 1857 to at least 1865 in order to establish their Kingdom of God on earth” (15-16). In essence, Maxwell asserts that the Mormons in Utah Territory were Confederate sympathizers, if not covert collaborators of the seceding southern states.

Maxwell cites five key pieces of evidence for his claims. First, Maxwell points readers to an 1832 prediction of Joseph Smith now canonized in the *Doctrine and Covenants* of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that “beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina... the Southern States shall be divided against the Northern States, and the Southern States will call on other nations, even the nation of Great Britain... in order to defend themselves against other nations...” and that this war between the states would spark wars throughout the world until the widespread violence brought about “a full end of nations,” which would be replaced by the Kingdom of God (xii; *Doctrine and Covenants*, section 87). Accordingly, Maxwell observes that Utah Mormons saw the Civil War and the destruction of the United States as an inevitable part of God’s plan for the moral redemption of mankind. Second, Brigham Young—who was never one to mince words—frequently made his distrust of the United States government publicly known and on some occasions went so far as to declare his hope that defeat in the Civil War would bring divine punishment upon the U.S. government for its treatment of the Mormons during the 1840s and 1850s. Third, Young and other Mormon leaders maintained tense relationships with federal officials in Utah, and Young intentionally obstructed the firm establishment of federal authority in that territory. Fourth, Maxwell presents recently-surfaced allegations from the nineteenth century that the American adventurer Walter Murray Gibson was a confederate spy while he served as a Mormon missionary. Fifth, Maxwell demonstrates that while the *Union Vedette*, the Salt Lake City newspaper published by the California volunteers stationed at Fort Douglas, celebrated major Union victories leading up to, and including, Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, the church’s *Deseret News* was absolutely silent on these events.

Maxwell’s book is certainly provocative, but its claims are based on a heavily skewed reading of surviving sources. The rhetoric of Brigham Young

and other Mormon leaders was often hostile and, at times, it certainly bordered on treason. Yet, for all the invective he aimed at the federal government, when it came time to strike deals that maintained the place of the Mormons (and Utah) in the Union, Young compromised. Similarly, as much as Mormon leaders' language condemned the United States for condoning their mistreatment and for fostering a spirit of violent persecution that resulted in the 1844 murder of their founder, every time the Confederacy invited the Mormons to join their secessionist movement, the Mormons declined. Indeed, on at least three documented occasions, representatives from the Confederacy offered the Mormons a place in their break-away country and were rebuffed by Young.

As Maxwell avers, Mormons did believe Smith's 1832 prophecy that an outbreak of violence in South Carolina would culminate in the dissolution of nations across the globe, but the immediacy with which they anticipated the realization of this prediction is unclear. It is certainly possible that Young and the Mormons believed the Civil War would bring about the end of all nations and usher in the millennial reign of Jesus Christ during their lifetime. Furthermore, Maxwell may even be correct in his speculation that news of Union victory—rather than the hoped for destruction of Union and Confederacy alike—disappointed the Mormons and explains the absence of celebratory headlines of Union success in the *Deseret News*. But to claim that Mormon anticipation of the Civil War bringing about the end of *all* nations proves Mormon willingness to aid a secession effort that, if successful, would result in the sustained existence of *two* nations is a stretch of fact and reason.

There is also an unfortunate inconsistency in the quality of Maxwell's historical sources. While he makes great use of Utah's territorial newspapers and other archival materials housed in repositories located in the greater Salt Lake City area, he also relies heavily on Wikipedia. It is a bit disconcerting to discover dozens of citations to this open-sourced website in a book published by an academic press. It also suggests an unevenness in Maxwell's grasps of the relevant sources, which at times is quite thorough.

The value of Maxwell's *The Civil War Years in Utah* lies primarily in the sources he collects and the provocative questions he poses. These sources need more scholarly attention and these questions certainly deserve deeper consideration from historians. Furthermore, he adds his voice—as well as his fluid and engaging prose style—to others who call for a more expansive geographic perspective of the Civil War, its causes, and its impact, a perspective

that moves beyond the traditional north-south dichotomy. Yet, Maxwell's book falls short in its extreme claims of the Mormons' motives and designs during the war—claims that are exposed as little more than unfounded theories when considered within the full breadth of sources documenting the history of Utah during the Civil War years. In aiming for provocative and spectacular conclusions, Maxwell missed an opportunity to turn historians' attention to more nuanced and revelatory conclusions on what the strained and unpredictable relationship between Mormon leaders and the federal government during this era tells us about the debated status of western territories, marginalized people, and federal authority in nineteenth-century American history.

Spencer W. McBride is an historian and documentary editor at the Joseph Smith Papers. He is the author of Pulpit and Nation: Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America (University of Virginia Press, forthcoming) and is working on a book about Joseph Smith's 1844 presidential campaign.