
From *The God Makers* to the Myth Maker: Simultaneous— and Lasting—Challenges to Mormonism's Reputation in the 1980s

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What a difference two decades can make.

In 1973, on the heels of the presidency of David O. McKay, a time retired LDS Public Affairs managing director Bruce Olsen called the “golden era of Mormonism,” the Church commissioned an opinion survey.¹ Respondents to that survey ranked the LDS Church relatively low in comparison to other denominations when it came to perceptions of secrecy and suspicion, and even lower in terms of public influence. In line with those survey results, in 1981 Martin Marty, one of the country's most eminent historians of religion, wrote that “by 1980, the Mormons had grown to be so much like everyone else or, perhaps, had so successfully gotten other Americans to be like them, that they no longer inspired curiosity for wayward ways.”²

In retrospect, there is significant irony in that pronouncement. Marty could hardly have guessed the extent to which curiosity, consternation, and even contempt for the wayward ways of Mormonism would experience a re-birth *after* 1980 and spawn what LDS Apostle Dallin H. Oaks called “some of

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the most sustained and intense Latter-day Saint Church-bashing since the turn of the century.” Because of that resurgent “LDS Church-bashing,” this article proposes that the mid-1980s can be seen as an important turning point—and perhaps *the* important turning point, at least in the last half-century—in the trajectory of American public opinion of Mormonism. Two overlapping controversies in that decade—*The God Makers* movie and the Mark Hofmann forgery scandal—deserve special attention for the mutually reinforcing impressions they left on the public mind, a one-two punch that left the Mormon image measurably bruised. A 1991 study by the Barna Group suggested that just six percent of Americans viewed Mormons “very favorably.” Three times as many respondents had given Mormons that favorable rating in a poll less than two decades earlier.³

More than twenty-five years have now passed since three bombs rocked Salt Lake City and, tragically, left two people dead. The ensuing investigation led to the unraveling of Mark Hofmann’s complex web of faked historical documents and finally to Hofmann’s conviction on murder charges. Reporters from across the nation descended on the city because of the brutality of the crimes, but they stayed with the story because of the intrigue connected to the forged documents. One theme came up in their reports again and again—the LDS Church’s supposed desire to suppress evidence that would threaten its official history. It was a dark time for Mormonism’s public reputation as Church leaders struggled to clear up misconceptions and distortions.

But it also seems important to consider that the Hofmann atrocities had such sticking power in part because they followed months of nationwide screenings of *The God Makers*, a movie that also vigorously challenged the origins of the Latter-day Saint movement. Both the movie’s claims and the media’s reporting on Mark Hofmann painted modern Mormonism as authoritarian, secretive, and menacing; and those depictions colored the types of public opinions that have resurfaced prominently in the years between Mitt Romney’s presidential campaigns. While *The God Makers* did not make much of a splash in the national media at the time, advertisements and reviews of the movie appeared in the pages of dozens of smaller regional newspapers; and the movie itself reached millions in the evangelical subculture. In contrast, the Hofmann story appeared everywhere on the national media radar, and thus hit a different audience than did *The God Makers*—while at the same time apparently confirming the movie makers’ claims. Thus these two moments from the 1980s made a significant and, for many, a definitive imprint on the public image of contemporary Mormonism. That imprint can be better understood when these two episodes are considered in sequence.

The God Makers' Milieu

Since the earliest days of Mormonism, the relationship between conservative, evangelical Protestants and Latter-day Saints had long been adversarial. Yet what happened in the 1980s seemed different, in tone and tactics. Because of that, what had largely been a sectarian conflict bubbled to the surface of national consciousness, and Christian warnings about the Mormon "cult" swayed opinions among new audiences *outside* of the religious community. This begs a question: Why did familiar anti-Mormon charges gain wider traction in the 1980s? In other words, why did more Americans begin paying attention to anti-Mormon claims?

Political influence is part of the answer. The LDS Church's efforts to defeat the ERA in the late 1970s had evoked a flurry of complaints, from activists and media observers across the nation, about Mormonism's previously unrecognized access to the levers of power. Those who opposed the political and ideological positions of Latter-day Saint leaders drew new attention to Mormonism's reported wealth and organizational might.

At the same time, many conservative Christian churches had also taken a new interest in politics in the late seventies. The build-up to the presidential election of 1980 had given rise to the "New Right," the "Christian Voice," the "Moral Majority." With surprising force and speed, an evangelical Christian political movement was born. Fundamentalist preachers, concerned about the impending end of the world, sought to reclaim America as a Christian nation and thus save souls drowning in the tide of secularism.

The irony of this political situation was that evangelical Protestants and Latter-day Saints favored very similar pro-family agendas. Their social priorities aligned closely. Yet this did not make them easy allies, nor did it mean that theological hatchets would be buried for the greater good. Instead, what seemed to worry many Protestants was that the Mormons' social morality would grant them legitimacy in the eyes of religious Americans. Such legitimacy would only increase the threat of Mormon proselytizing, since it would simultaneously decrease perceptions of Mormon peculiarity and thus open more doors for Mormon missionaries. If anything, parallel political positions meant that concerned Christians would have to work that much harder to distinguish themselves from the heterodox Mormons. For those who saw Latter-day Saints as a classic "wolf-in-sheep's-clothing" group, raising their voices in warning took on a new urgency.⁴

Dr. Edmond Poole, associate pastor of First Baptist church in Dallas, put a numerical face on the Mormon threat when he told *Newsweek* magazine in March of 1985 that "Mormons [were] winning over Baptist souls at a rate of '231 every single day.'" Arthur Criscoe of the Southern Baptist Sunday

School Board in Nashville was likewise distraught that LDS missionaries were “moving across the Southland, . . . knocking on doors, penetrating.” In 1980 and 1981, the LDS Church announced plans to build new temples in what many considered the evangelical heartland, first Atlanta and then Dallas. In *Newsweek’s* view, a “turf war” was in full swing.⁵

Those Christians looking to repel this invasion received help from some energetic allies. Several groups of ex-Mormons took the campaign against their former faith to new levels. Exposés by disgruntled former Latter-day Saints had been a staple of anti-Mormon literature since the days of E. D. Howe and his 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*. Yet again, something about the intensity of these efforts in the 1980s made them almost a new breed. Never before had these publications achieved the “bestseller” exposure that they did in the eighties, when millions of viewers watched *The God Makers* series of movies, or hundreds of thousands of readers bought the companion book. Significantly, these anti-Mormon productions focused much of their attention on the religious rites that took place behind closed doors in Latter-day Saint temples. This new emphasis on Mormon secrecy only reinforced accusations of cult-like behaviors.

The word “cult” carried with it new dread after the 1978 tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana. Jim Jones and his People’s Temple followers killed a U.S. Congressman and the journalists who accompanied him. These atrocities became only more shocking with the subsequent mass suicide of more than nine hundred church members. Thus critics who labeled the LDS Church a “cult” threw long shadows onto the Mormon image. Was the Church too clandestine, too rich, too powerful, too centralized to be trusted?

Perhaps the most blatant expression of these early misgivings came in a *Christianity Today* interview with Jerry Falwell. The interviewer asked him if he would ever preach on his television program against “the deceptive advertising in the *Reader’s Digest* by the Mormons.” Judiciously, Falwell said that he would not attack Mormon members of his political coalition. The interviewer countered with what evangelicals certainly knew was the critical issue: “Say that in Salt Lake City they took the Moral Majority position right down the line, but because of false doctrine, they would not ultimately go to heaven. . . . I’m concerned that we could get the country morally straight and people would still go to hell.” Reverend Falwell answered that “if a nation or a society lives by divine principles, even though the people personally don’t know the One who taught and lived those principles, that society will be blessed. An unsaved person will be blessed by tithing to the work of God. He’ll still go to hell a tither, but God blesses the principle.”⁶ Indeed, the rumblings of an impending storm were growing louder.

That is what made the statement from the *Christianity Today* piece about “the deceptive advertising in the *Reader's Digest* by the Mormons” so telling. Evangelicals had long felt that the LDS Church was essentially a non-Christian cult.⁷ But by the late 1970s, concerned Christians feared that the LDS Church's successful advertising campaign had obscured the religion's true identity. With renewed urgency, Walter Martin published in 1978 *The Maze of Mormonism*, a three hundred page-plus treatise on what he called the “fastest growing cult in the world.” Other ministries sold audiocassette lectures with titles like “The Mormon Dilemma: Christian or Cult?” or “The Marks of a Cult.” Yet even with this proliferation of anti-Mormon material, nothing exploded onto the scene like former Mormon Ed Decker's 1982 film called *The God Makers*. Christians who saw this as a public perception battle, with casualties measured in souls, found in the film their most potent ammunition.⁸

The God Makers represented something new in anti-Mormon polemics. It went further than simply repeating that Mormons were not Christians—a charge that Mormons were well-accustomed to by the 1980s.⁹ Instead of depicting Mormonism as a religion that had strayed from the Christian fold, *The God Makers* (and the “wave” of anti-Mormonism that the movie inaugurated) suggested something more sinister, something based less on Mormon confusion and more on Mormon cunning.¹⁰ Ed Decker's film aimed to expose Mormonism's supposed occult—and even demonic—ties. Decker and the members of his “Saints Alive” group (also known as “Ex-Mormons for Jesus”) were former Mormons who, after their respective conversions to evangelical Christianity, felt compelled to reveal the LDS Church for what to them it really represented—a dangerously alluring counterfeit of Christianity. Based on that guiding philosophy, their film pulled no punches.

The God Makers opens with an aerial shot of the LDS Church's Hawaii Temple. From the beginning, the tone is ominous: “It looks beautiful from the outside,” a narrator says, “but when you peel off the mask and talk to the victims, you uncover another part of the story. The documented evidence you are about to see may seem unbelievable, but it is all true.” This opening scene then cuts away to a man who asserts, “When they took my family, there wasn't anything else to live for. I tried to kill myself.” Another man says quietly, “They've turned my beautiful children against me.” A young woman describes “the brainwashing techniques of this organization” as “really incredibly effective.” The next shot is of Ed Decker sitting with two lawyers. Decker proposes a “class-action lawsuit” for the “victims” of “one of the most deceptive and most dangerous groups in the entire world.” Decker tells the attorneys, “I have documentation that ties it into the occult and to Satanism.” The younger of the two lawyers listens skeptically and then responds, “I have a hard time believing you. . . . These people pride themselves in a sense of

family togetherness . . . and a very conspicuous form of moral rectitude.” Decker shoots back, “That’s part of the incredible deception, and . . . we need to expose it.” Only then do viewers discover that this unnamed organization is, in fact, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “one of the wealthiest and fastest-growing religions” in the world, thanks to its “carefully groomed, Osmond-family image.”¹¹

“To most of us,” the narrator warns, “Mormons appear to be real Christians who live their faith.” Two ex-Mormons agree: “These people seem to be Christian . . . they had the same attributes.” Naïve converts are lured in, according to one former member, by the Church’s “social program, which was fabulous,” or “the family atmosphere.” An anxiety over Mormon growth pervades the movie. Repeated references to the Church’s army of young missionaries, or to the chapels that were being built at a rate of two every day around the world, or to estimates that the LDS Church membership could number seventy million within only a few decades, mark the film’s narrative.

Yet *The God Makers* leaves little doubt that what is to be most feared about the Mormons is their bizarre doctrine, taught secretly inside cloistered temples but not disclosed to potential converts. The bulk of the film proceeds with almost no musical accompaniment; however, the scenes that discuss Joseph Smith’s epiphanies or Mormon temple rituals play against a soundtrack that even Sandra Tanner, an avowed opponent of the Church who appeared in the film, later called “spooky.”¹²

A choppy cartoon segment gives a brief overview of Latter-day Saint beliefs, which apparently center on the precept that “billions of . . . highly-evolved humanoids” rule the universe. Two of these “extra-terrestrial humanoids from a distant star called Kolob visited a 14-year-old boy”—a “treasure-seeker . . . known for his tall tales”—“named Joseph Smith.” This event launched Mormonism, a religion with the ultimate purpose of helping men and women become part of the exalted “humanoid” ruling class. When the cartoon ends, the same lawyer who protested earlier shakes his head and says, “This sounds like science fiction or Greek mythology.” Ed Decker explains, “That’s why it’s such a secret. That’s why even the Mormons don’t talk about it. They’re embarrassed by it, too.”

At a number of screenings of *The God Makers*, as soon as the lights came up at the movie’s end, Mormon viewers were anxious to dispute statements such as this one. To Latter-day Saints, *The God Makers* presented a caricature of Mormonism that left them dumbfounded more than embarrassed. The film seemed based on distortions that made their Church unrecognizable. For example, according to the movie, the “secret ceremonies” in the temple “are reserved for an elite few,” such that “even most Mormons have never seen” them. While this assertion was technically true if “most” meant a simple ma-

majority (since only actively participating *adults* worship in the temple), it also belied the reality that hundreds of thousands of Mormons had participated in these rites over the years, a number not readily suggested by the phrase “an elite few.” Likewise, the film’s insinuation that Joseph Smith’s death somehow superseded that of Jesus Christ would have been as offensive to a Mormon viewer as it would have been to an evangelical. Yet because the film warned viewers that Mormons had been instructed to use Christian terminology when talking with others, *The God Makers* effectively rendered any Mormon claim to Christian faith suspect. In fact, those who discussed Latter-day Saint theology in the movie pointedly used the qualifier “the *Mormon* Jesus” to separate LDS beliefs from those of traditional Christianity.

In this way, the movie grated on Mormon sensibilities as it portrayed a church and a culture that seemed foreign to most Latter-day Saints. There were testimonials from a half-dozen women who said their Mormon bishops encouraged them to divorce their evangelical Christian husbands—the ultimate hypocrisy for a church with a family-friendly façade. There was a woman whose psychiatric-nurse friend asked, “Why is it that there are so many [Mormon] women in my [hospital] ward?” There was a father whose teenage son had recently committed suicide because of Church pressure to conform—symptomatic of a suicide rate in Utah that “one of the world’s foremost experts on Mormonism” called “much higher” than the national average. Yet perhaps nothing in the film jarred Latter-day Saints as much as the depiction of temple rites and theology, especially in a cartoon-animated segment that seemed designed to be intentionally crude and ridiculous in its presentation format.

While the film was unapologetic in its dismissal of Mormonism’s sacred tenets and ordinances, several interviewees did strike a tone of sympathy for the unknowing Mormon believer. A college professor who scoffed at the authenticity of the Book of Mormon sadly admitted that it “never ceases to amaze how many intelligent people are Mormons but are locked in and won’t even take another look” because of a culture which emphasized that Church members “[accept] what their church leaders” say rather than a “sit down and study” for themselves approach. Sandra Tanner suggested that LDS missionaries should not necessarily be blamed for perpetuating Mormon falsehoods, since “Mormon leaders are deliberately keeping from [them] the true history of their religion because they know [Mormons] will have a hard time believing it’s from God if [they] saw how it really was all put together.” Nor did most Mormons know, as Ed Decker revealed near the end of the movie, that in Anton Szandor LaVey’s *The Satanic Bible* under “infernal names,” “Mormo” was the god of the living dead, king of the ghouls—and Mormons, not surprisingly to Decker, are obsessed with converting the dead. For Decker’s group,

all of the evidence pointed to the same conclusion: Joseph Smith borrowed more from the occult than he did from authentic Christianity. This message, they felt, demanded an audience, and they certainly found one.

No previous anti-Mormon campaign had carried as far and as wide as *The God Makers*. By late 1983, the movie was being shown to “about 1,000 audiences a month,” often to “standing-room only crowds.”¹³ In interviews and speeches, Decker and his associates did not mince words about their objectives.¹⁴ They consistently raised the point that the majority of those who joined the LDS Church—“75% of their converts”—came from Christian backgrounds.¹⁵ They proposed that this threat to orthodox Christianity could be thwarted by “[looking] behind the ‘Osmond image’” that attracted Mormon converts in the first place.¹⁶

Church leaders conceded that this marked opposition was the most vigorous since the days of persecution over polygamy.¹⁷ *The God Makers* even fueled a backlash against Brigham Young University’s Center for Near Eastern Studies building project in faraway Jerusalem.¹⁸

However, as widely viewed and inflammatory as it was, the impact of *The God Makers* on the Mormon image, by itself, most likely would have been limited to an important but specific demographic group (evangelical Christians) if it had not been that the movie’s themes and allegations seemed simultaneously corroborated by other more mainstream sources—especially after two bombing murders shocked Salt Lake City residents in October 1985. Suddenly, the unfolding Mark Hofmann bombing scandal suggested that evangelical shots at the LDS Church’s dark “underside” had hit their mark.¹⁹

Mark Hofmann’s Myth Making

Pat Matrisciana, the producer of *The God Makers*, had claimed, “If the truth be known about the Mormon Church, the average American citizen would live in fear.”²⁰ Echoes of her warning began to reach new ears as reporters from across the country sped to Salt Lake City after the bombings. The threat of a bomber on the loose alone made for headlines, but when police unexpectedly named Hofmann the bombing *suspect*, even though he had been the apparent victim in the third and final explosion, the story took on a dimension of intrigue that captured everyone’s attention—and that did not bode well for Mormon officials.

Like wildfire, word spread that the link between the victims was the buying and selling of Mormon historical papers. Crime reporters hurriedly gathering background information learned from Mormon insiders that over the past five years, Hofmann had “discovered” dozens of manuscript documents that called into question the official narrative of Mormon origins. There were

whispers about Church cover-up, since this new “evidence” of chinks in Joseph Smith’s traditional story threatened to rock the foundations of Mormonism and raised specters from the Mormon past.

Perhaps the best way to understand the relationship between the Mark Hofmann saga and its effect on the public perception of Latter-day Saints is to start at the end, when Hofmann sat as a convicted murderer and forger and gave prison interviews to police investigators seeking to sort out the intricacies of his complex plot. In one of those interviews, Hofmann revealed that he lost faith in Mormonism when he was fourteen years old, though he continued to profess an active belief and participate in church worship accordingly. He even served two years as a full-time missionary for the Church in England. However, his true feelings motivated him with a desire “to change Mormon history,” to “[rewrite] . . . Mormon history” and show it a “fairytale.”²¹ In effect, the Church’s public image was at the very heart of Hofmann’s plans. For a time, he succeeded in dramatic fashion. His first move was strategically brilliant. Years earlier, in the spring of 1980, Hofmann was a premed student at Utah State University and an avid collector of historical documents. He arrived at the office of a Church employee (an instructor at the LDS Institute of Religion adjacent to the university campus) with a folded and apparently aged piece of paper. The instructor immediately recognized that the document bore the identifying marks of a famed page in Mormon history, the “Anthon transcript”—several lines of hieroglyphic-type characters that Joseph Smith copied from the metallic plates he had discovered.²²

After an intense authentication process involving various experts, Church leaders announced the discovery in a news release. Church historians celebrated the transcript as the earliest known sample of Joseph Smith’s handwriting. In the summer of 1980, the *Ensign* (the Church’s official magazine) and *BYU Studies* both published articles describing the find.²³ In a magnanimous gesture, Hofmann wanted the Church to own the transcript and the Smith family Bible in which he said he had found the folded document; in exchange, he accepted some rare Mormon money from pioneer times, and a first edition copy of the Book of Mormon that lacked a title page.²⁴ His first forgery had succeeded famously, and the exchange process provided Hofmann a brief acquaintance with several LDS Apostles, as well as instant notoriety among Mormon history aficionados.²⁵ He would soon cement his reputation with a rapid series of monumental document acquisitions.

Over the next three years, Hofmann’s activities dominated conversations about Mormon documents dealing. He seemed to have an uncanny knack for unearthing precious Mormon memorabilia.²⁶ For a Church so intensely interested in documenting its past, his finds were treasures. Yet Mormon historians often spoke about them with a sense of uneasiness as they sought to work

them into the traditional narrative, since deviations from that narrative could sow seeds of doubt for believers. If these discoveries chipped away at the reliability of the faith's foundational events, what could be said about the stability of the Church that was built on those pilings?

That is why none of Hofmann's previous forgeries matched the eventual impact of a Martin Harris letter from 1830 that he brought to the Church's attention in January 1984. Hofmann's Martin Harris recounted that a young Joseph Smith told him it was a salamander-like creature rather than an angel that met Joseph at the spot of the buried metallic plates, and that the salamander then morphed into human form. Thus the Harris letter became known simply as the "Salamander Letter."²⁷

The nearly simultaneous appearance of an 1825 letter from Joseph Smith to one of his earliest employers, Josiah Stowell, added to the controversy. The Josiah Stowell letter had Joseph Smith transmitting information about treasure seeking and divining rods, activities that seemed consonant with a belief in shape-shifting salamanders. (Mark Hofmann had also forged the Josiah Stowell letter.) These two discoveries seemed to confirm what critics had long accused: the murky origins of Joseph Smith's religion carried the deep imprint of magical and superstitious practices.²⁸

What gave these reports about Mormonism's magical roots special salience in 1985 was that they seemed to corroborate strongly the serious claims made in *The God Makers*. Those who had seen the movie now could hear echoes of the film's condemnation of Joseph Smith in these discovered documents. They could understand why Mormon officials would reportedly want to keep such information closely guarded from supposedly deluded Church members. Joseph Smith himself had admitted that he had accepted employment in treasure-seeking ventures in his youth, but the abortive efforts he described had nothing to do with his later religious activities.²⁹ That is what made the Salamander Letter troubling for some Mormons, so troubling in fact that one Mormon historian told *Time* magazine in May 1985, "It's an incredible crisis of faith for me. . . . It means our historical foundation becomes a nice story that has no connection to reality." *Time* also quoted a California couple who wrote "to friends explaining . . . [that] new revelations about the Mormons' founding prophet . . . destroyed their belief" in Mormonism.³⁰

It was the tragic loss of life rather than the loss of personal faith, however, that brought this largely in-house affair to the attention of national readers. The brutal bombings, meant apparently to buy Hofmann time for his most ambitious forgery, drew scores of reporters from around the country, but the Hofmann crimes created some unique journalistic challenges. National interest in the story seemed driven by the greed and violence that pervaded the Mark Hofmann case, especially when he was named the principal suspect. Yet

the story had a complex *religious* component, too. Peggy Fletcher Stack, then editor of *Sunstone*, noted that “the papers tended to send their crime reporters to Utah and they knew nothing about Mormons and had everything wrong.” Historian Jan Shippo agreed. Media outlets soon “realized that their crime reporters did not know enough about Mormonism to cover the story properly, but they were afraid that their religion reporters would not be able to describe what was happening satisfactorily because they did not know enough about crime and about the legal maneuvering that immediately started after Hofmann was charged with murder.” Because both Stack and Shippo were prominent in the field of Mormon studies, reporter after reporter turned to them for background. In their experience, it was obvious that the majority of these journalists possessed “an abysmal lack of knowledge of Mormonism.”³¹

That crucial observation cannot be overlooked. It reveals much about the type of reporting—and reporting mishaps—that would surround the Mark Hofmann affair. As the investigation into the bombings progressed and as journalists began to research the connection between Mark Hofmann and his victims, they learned about Steve Christensen’s involvement as a client and an underwriter of Hofmann’s documentary treasure hunts, and as an early owner of the Salamander Letter. These reporters quickly latched onto the import of Hofmann’s most recent and most controversial finds, since these documents seemed to shake the historical foundations of the prosperous LDS Church. It was this element of intrigue that dominated media coverage of the Hofmann bombings.

Stories about these so-called “Mormon murders” used words like “the strange labyrinth of Mormon history,” “shadowy,” and “notoriously secretive” to paint a picture of historical scandal and cover-up.³² The Mormon archives, secretive and impenetrable, became the backdrop for concealed controversy. In January 1986, three months after the bombings, the *New York Times* reported, “There have been no arrests, but if nothing else, the police investigation has revealed the church’s hierarchy to be obsessed with stopping any tampering with the church’s official account of its past.”³³

Throughout the developing saga, the Church’s silence seemed to some a tacit admission of complicity. In reality, the Church’s silence highlighted a significant public relations challenge. Legal restrictions prevented Church spokesmen from making an immediate response. Because the Church was a major party in the Hofmann criminal investigation, detectives and attorneys advised against discussing the pending case in public. From the Church’s perspective, this allowed the national press to make unchallenged insinuations about official entanglement in the web of deceit.³⁴ Church leaders saw misleading ambiguity everywhere in the media. *U.S. News and World Report*, for example, never mentioned that Mark Hofmann was charged with *forging* the

Salamander Letter when it declared that “whoever leads the Mormons into the 21st century will have to grapple with the disturbing effects of the bombing deaths of two Mormons who played a crucial role in authenticating the ‘white salamander’ letter, which contradicts church teaching on the founding of the religion.” There was little LDS leaders could do publicly to counter such incriminating and incomplete assessments.³⁵

This situation lasted for nearly fifteen months, as investigators built their case against Mark Hofmann.³⁶ Instead of facing a trial, however, Hofmann entered into a plea bargain in January 1987.³⁷ By the time of his admission of guilt, his story had lost much of its momentum. Reporting about the verdict did not command the same level of attention as did initial speculation about the crime. From the LDS Church’s perspective, this drop in coverage and exposure only exacerbated the injuries that the forgeries and bombings inflicted on the Church’s reputation, because for many readers, the record was never set straight.³⁸

Typical of the difficulty for rehabilitating the Mormon image was a sequence of events with the *Los Angeles Times*. The Church protested vehemently against the *Times*’ coverage of the Mark Hofmann episode, especially because the newspaper referred to an unnamed source who accused the Church of hiding a history written by the Church’s “second elder,” Oliver Cowdery.³⁹ In 1986, the Church stated officially that a thorough search of its archives turned up no such “Cowdery history.” Then, in October 1986, the *Salt Lake Tribune* revealed that through the course of the criminal investigation, it became clear that the unnamed source was, in fact, Mark Hofmann.⁴⁰ He had planted the information about the Cowdery history and its supposed references to Joseph Smith’s early occult practices to give his forgeries additional credence. Yet in late March and early April 1987, the *Los Angeles Times* still ran a two-part feature on the Hofmann murders that included references to the Cowdery history—but no mention that Hofmann had fabricated the whole story.⁴¹ Finally, after the transcripts of Hofmann’s police interviews were released, and Hofmann’s role in the creating the Cowdery history rumor was undeniable, the *Los Angeles Times*’ retraction appeared in a column tucked on page twenty-nine of the paper.⁴²

From the Mormon perspective, the low point may have come in the publication of Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith’s 1988 book *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death*. They approached the Mark Hofmann case with the intent to demonstrate that “the church paid huge sums to Hofmann for incriminating documents to keep them from becoming public and was, therefore, guilty of a cover-up.” Curt Bench was interviewed by Naifeh and Smith, and he later debated the authors publicly about their conclusions. Bench felt that the two “didn’t know Mormon

history,” rather “they just wanted to sell books.” Because of this, he and Jan Shipps both agreed that *Mormon Murders* was the “worst” of the Hofmann-related books that appeared.⁴³

What informed Naifeh and Smith's approach was their assertion that “since receiving a revelation in 1839, Joseph Smith determined that ‘the punishment for dissent in his church would be death.’” Director of the LDS Church's Public Affairs Department, Richard Lindsay, called that claim “preposterous.” In fact, Lindsay issued a full-out assault on the book and its authors, so inaccurate and “scurrilous” did the Church deem *Mormon Murders*. He condemned Naifeh and Smith, two Harvard-educated lawyers, in a point-by-point refutation. Singled out were statements such as this one: “The church tried to dampen the investigation into Hofmann and to suppress evidence.” Lindsay responded that “the church cooperated fully with federal, state and local law enforcement officials responding to every inquiry and request. All 48 documents acquired from Hofmann were made available to law enforcement officials.” Lindsay's chief complaint was that “indefensibly, they (Naifeh and Smith) attempt to make the church culpable with Mark W. Hofmann in the ensuing tragic outcome.”⁴⁴

While the facts may have been on Lindsay's side, publicity was not. *Mormon Murders* was an “alternate Literary Guild selection,” and “was published in both hardcover and paperback” editions nationwide.⁴⁵ One reviewer heaped glowing praise on the authors for their work in showing how “church officials . . . used their enormous power throughout Utah to clamp down on the investigation of the crimes and to obscure the church's connection to the killer.” This kept the Church's president from testifying in court, where he would have been “revealed as a liar.” In other words, this was the “Mormon Watergate—with the glaring difference that, in this case, officialdom won.” The reviewer concluded with this prediction: “No matter what your opinion going in, you'll finish ‘Mormon Murders’ with a vastly different view of those clean-cut young men in their white shirts and ties pedaling their bikes, and peddling their beliefs, through the world's neighborhoods.”⁴⁶ Another reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times* called the book “a rich trove of details about the deceit, lying, and covering up by top [Mormon] church leaders.”⁴⁷

A month after the bombings, Jan Shipps wrote in the *Christian Century* that:

sufficient time has elapsed since the events of October 15 and 16 [the dates of the bombings] for that story to have turned into yesterday's news. Yet for the most part this has not occurred. Interest in these particular instances of violence is still great enough to keep the story alive, not just in Utah, but throughout the nation. It is possible that this continuing interest can be explained by the extent to which, in this instance, life imitates art—that is, if a finely constructed detective story can be called

art. The elements are all there. The tragic events of last month brought destruction into the lives of three apparently ordinary people. But these apparently ordinary individuals were also Latter-day Saints—Mormons, members of a community that, despite its intense Americanness, still seems to have a somewhat exotic air about it.⁴⁸

And that “exoticness” seemed inescapable simply because of the sheer number of times the Hofmann scandal drew the media’s attention. Database searches of national media electronic archives reveal that while *The God Makers* movie generated only a half-dozen stories in major national periodicals (even though the movie made headlines in a large number of local newspapers), a similar database search for stories on Mark Hofmann yields two hundred thirty results.⁴⁹

It is worth noting that for Mormons there was something of a public image irony in the 1980s: the decade’s controversies coincided with some of Mormonism’s most significant publicity triumphs. Yet the simultaneous proliferation of positive human interest stories on successful Mormons in the 1980s did not seem to sway public perception of the LDS Church *as an institution*.⁵⁰ This “Mormon individual” versus “Mormon institution” image discrepancy came through in press coverage when Sharlene Wells, the daughter of a Church General Authority, was named Miss America in 1984. In January 1985, the BYU Cougar football team was crowned national champion, an achievement that brought unprecedented press attention to Provo. Still, even in the coverage of these and other celebrity Mormons, there lingered a marked sense of pervasive institutional control. At the same time that reporters expressed admiration for Mormons’ moral rectitude and missionary service, they also derided them for being “clones” and an army of “do-rights.” *Rolling Stone*, for example, hit hard: “Drinking, smoking, premarital sex—they’re all taboo at Brigham Young University, the nation’s largest private college, where obedience, *not thought*, is rewarded and snitches are big men on campus. Good Mormon, America!” As Mormon faces popped up in every arena of American life—more than ever before—their prominence did not erase public discomfort about the church that guided those smiling men and women.⁵¹

If this sounds familiar to Mormon image watchers in 2011, in the end, then, we return to where we began, but with a twist: what little difference two decades can make! From the mid-1980s, we fast forward to 2008, when any illusions that Mormons might have held about fully shedding the “cult” label were shattered during Mitt Romney’s first presidential campaign. Pollster Gary Lawrence’s extensive 2008 opinion survey showed that some very revealing negative impressions still lingered prominently in American minds: 75% of those surveyed agreed that the LDS Church was “controlling”; 55% that it was “powerful”; 49% that it was “mysterious”; 47% that it was “secretive.” In that same survey, 45% of respondents saw Mormons as “blind followers,” and

38% agreed that Mormons were “brainwashed by their leaders.”⁵² A strong argument can be made that the less-than-flattering—and, for Latter-day Saints, surprising—Mormon public image that seemed to be repeatedly on display in 2008 (and beyond) was essentially a retooled version of an image drawn in the 1980s. It was as if journalists, religionists, and pundits had simply dusted off a twenty-year-old portrait that Mormons had hoped was not tucked away in some corner of the attic of public consciousness. To their dismay, that portrait still existed, and it had not faded enough over time.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Olsen, Interview with Jonice Hubbard, September 8, 2006, transcript included in Jonice Hubbard, “Pioneers in Twentieth Century Mormon Media: Oral Histories of Latter-day Saint Electronic and Public Relations Professionals” (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 2007), 121. Olsen retired in 2008 as the managing director of the Church’s Public Affairs Department.

2. Martin E. Marty, “Foreword,” in Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), ix.

3. See “Attitudes and Opinions Towards Religion: Religions attitudes of adults (over 18) who are residents of six major metropolitan areas in the United States: Seattle, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Dallas, Chicago, New York City—August 1973,” L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 17; Dallin H. Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign* 17, no. 10 (October 1987): 63; Barna Research Group, “Americans’ Impressions of Various Church Denominations,” September 18, 1991, copy in the author’s possession, 1; The Gallup Poll #978, June 14, 1977, accessed at Gallup Brain database. In the 1977 Gallup poll, 18% of respondents gave Mormons a “+4 or +5” rating, and 36% of respondents gave Mormons a “+1, +2, or +3” rating. In the 1991 Barna survey, 6% of respondents felt “very favorable” and only 21% “somewhat favorable” about Latter-day Saints. Therefore in 1977 54% of those surveyed ranked Mormons on the positive side of the scale, while in 1991, only 27% ranked Mormons favorably. Baptist churches ranked the highest in the 1991 favorability study at a 29% “very favorable” rating. “Americans’ Impressions of Various Church Denominations,” 2.

4. See an example of this emerging trend in Donald P. Shoemaker, “Why Your Neighbor Joined the Mormon Church,” *Christianity Today*, October 11, 1974, 11–15. Shoemaker complimented Latter-day Saints for their admirable family focus, and even advocated that other Christians adopt similar programs, but asserted in no uncertain terms that Mormon theology was at least partly a result of diabolical influence, and thus “a concept Christians must reject.”

5. Kenneth L. Woodward and Barbara Bugower, “Bible-Belt Confrontation,” *Newsweek*, March 4, 1985, 65.

6. “An Interview with the Lone Ranger of American Fundamentalism,” *Christianity Today*, September 4, 1981, 23–24.

7. See, for example, Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963); Walter Ralston Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults: An Analysis of the Major Cult Systems in the Present Christian Era* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), 325, 328–32, 335–36.

8. Walter Ralston Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1978), 9–10, 236. The “fastest-growing” description was included in promotional materials for *The God Makers* film, copy in possession of the author. On Martin’s influence as “certainly the most prominent” of the “cult watchers,” see Tim Stafford, “The Kingdom of the Cult Watchers,” *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1991, 20–22. See also “Cult Patterns Similar: Jim Jones Ruse,” *The Utah Evangel*, December 1978, reprinted in *Bible Believers Bulletin*, January 1979, 5; Ed Decker, “The Mormon Dilemma: Christian or Cult?” [sound recording] (Issaquah, WA: Ex-Mormons for Jesus, 1979), and John Marler, “The Marks of a Cult” [sound recording] (Safety Harbor, FL: EMFJ Ministries, 1982), Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

9. For example, some form of “Are Mormons Christians?” was one of the five questions most commonly asked of guides at the Church’s 1964 World’s Fair exhibit. See Nathaniel Smith Kogan, “The Mormon Pavilion: Mainstreaming the Saints at the New York World’s Fair, 1964–65,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 36.

10. This argument has been made by observers of anti-Mormon activity. For example, Massimo Introvigne asserted, “I agree that the new wave of counter-Mormonism which emerged in the 1980s is different from both secular and sectarian anti-Mormonism which have existed since the birth of the Mormon church.” Massimo Introvigne, “The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 154. In a subsequent article Introvigne argued that “*The God Makers* marked the emergence of a new anti-Mormonism that I have called ‘postrationalist.’ He explains: “Postrationalist anti-Mormonism advances the theory ‘that Joseph Smith was in touch with a superhuman source of revelation and power.’ However, according to the postrationalist theory, the superhuman source was not God, but Satan.” Introvigne also suggested that this new brand of anti-Mormonism drew on an old tradition of “French nineteenth-century counter-subversion literature, which focused on Freemasonry and included tangential references to Mormonism.” See Massimo Introvigne, “Old Wine in New Bottles: The Story Behind Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1995–1996): 45, 65. Daniel C. Peterson advanced a similar analysis. See Daniel C. Peterson, “A Modern ‘Malleus maleficarum,’” in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 231–60, also cited by Introvigne, “The Devil Makers,” 154.

11. *The God Makers*, Jeremiah Films, 1982. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the author’s transcription of the film.

12. Sandra Tanner, Utah Lighthouse Ministry, “Facts Misrepresented in ‘Godmakers’ Issue,” letter to the editor, *Idaho Statesman* (Boise, Idaho), March 3, 1984, copy in possession of the author.

13. Bob Keeper, “Ex-Mormons’ Film Sparks Controversy,” *Register-Guard* (Eugene, Oregon), January 14, 1984, photocopy in possession of the author.

14. See Donna Anderson, “Former Mormons Seek to Convert Mormons to Mainstream Christianity,” *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, Florida), December 10, 1983, copy in possession of the author. Anderson notes that Jim Witham, assistant director of Saints Alive, said the primary thrust of his group’s ministry was to “bring Mormons back to the Jesus of the Bible. . . . The secondary thrust is to acquaint Christianity with the true teachings of Mormonism,” and *The God Makers* was “the group’s most potent weapon.” Anderson’s piece traveled far on the Associated Press wire. News clipping services employed by the LDS Church sent in copies from papers in Washington, Louisiana, and California. For the persistence of Saints Alive’s philosophy and activity, see also Scott Fagerstrom, “Ex-Mormons Warn Away Potential Church Converts,” *Orange County Register*

(Santa Ana, California), February 27, 1988, B10.

15. For example, a newspaper advertisement for a showing of the film stated: "This hard-hitting documentary peels back the lies to expose today's most respectable yet deceitful and fasters growing cult, who lure 75% of their converts from Christian Churches." *Hillsboro Argus* (Hillsboro, Oregon), September 22, 1983, copy in possession of the author.

16. Diane Pettit, "Film Depicts Mormonism as 'Cult,'" *Morning Tribune* (Lewiston, Idaho), October 9, 1983, 1A.

17. Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve was noted as having characterized the anti-Mormon activities as being "the most intense in decades, though modest compared to the vilification and mob attacks that drove the polygamy-practicing Mormons of the 19th century to the sanctuary of Utah's desert wastes." See Michael White, "Church Says Mounting Anti-Mormon Fervor Having Little Effect," Associated Press wire service, October 5, 1985.

18. "Mormon Project Under Fire," *Seattle Times* (Seattle, Washington), August 9, 1985, B4. Another report stated: "Added voices of opposition come from Protestant, evangelical, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox officials who fear the proven success of Mormon missionaries will entice the predominantly Arab laity of churches in the Holy Land into their fold. The battle line was drawn in early July when local Christian leaders challenged the Mormons' right to call themselves Christian." Thomas A. Indinopulos, "Mormon-Jewish Turmoil in Zion," *Christian Century*, December 4, 1985, 1123. It took a May 1986 letter from 154 U.S. Congressmen in support of the completion of the BYU Jerusalem Center to secure finally government position for the lease. Students first occupied the unfinished center in 1987, which was ultimately dedicated in 1989. See James R. Kearl, "Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies," in Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book 2000), 570–71.

19. Jan Shippo, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 101.

20. Janet Barker, "Anti-Mormon Film Makes Impact on South Bay," *South Bay Breeze* (Torrance, California), January 21, 1984, B2.

21. Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 316–17. At the time of writing, Turley was the managing director of the LDS Church Historical Department. Because of his position, he had unprecedented access to Church records, minutes, and leadership in the production of his book, making *Victims* the most detailed account of the Church's side of the Mark Hofmann story. Two other important books about the Hofmann forgeries are Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989), and Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death* (New York, NY: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988). Sillitoe and Roberts reported that, as a college student, Hofmann had told his one-time fiancée Kate Reid that "he did not believe in Mormonism and doubted the existence of God." After their engagement ended, Hofmann told Reid that he was dropping his plans for medical school to research Mormon historical documents full-time. When she countered, "I think that's dumb. You don't even believe in the church," he responded, "I have to remain a member of good standing so people will trust me and I can have access to what I need. But I can make good money at this, and eventually the documents I find are going to show people that they believe in a fairytale." Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 222–23, 231.

22. See "The Anthon Transcript," in Turley, *Victims*, 24–39. See also "The Treasure in

a Bible,” in Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 235–53. While both books basically document the same chronology, the different scope of each book quickly becomes apparent. Sillitoe and Roberts conducted a vast number of interviews with Hofmann’s friends and associates, thus emphasizing details about Hofmann’s background and activities outside of his document dealings with the Church. Turley concentrated on Hofmann’s relationships and transactions with the LDS Church and its leaders, and the subsequent legal proceedings of his criminal trial.

23. See Mark William Hofmann, “Finding the Joseph Smith Document,” *Ensign* 10, no. 7 (July 1980): 73; and Danel W. Bachman, “A Look at the Newly Discovered Joseph Smith Manuscript,” *Ensign* 10, no. 7 (July 1980): 69; and Bachman, “Sealed in a Book: Preliminary Observations on the Newly Found ‘Anthon Transcript,’” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 325.

24. See Turley, *Victims*, 39.

25. For example, see the photo of Hofmann examining the Anthon Transcript with the members of the Church’s First Presidency, in Turley, *Victims*, 31.

26. For a list of forged documents that the Church obtained from Mark Hofmann, together with information about the public announcement about each item (before it was determined they were all forgeries), see “Fraudulent Documents from Forger Mark Hofmann Noted,” *Ensign* 17, no. 10 (October 1987): 79.

27. For a description of the letter, a transcription and photograph of it, as well as a discussion of the uproar the letter created see Turley, “The Salamander Letter,” in *Victims*, 79–111. See also Sillitoe and Roberts, “The Birth of the Salamander Letter,” in *Salamander*, 269–99.

28. The Josiah Stowell letter was noted in Associated Press and United Press International wire stories in May 1985. One article implied that the Church had intended to keep the letter under wraps: “No explanation was given of how the church got the letter. But George Smith, president of Signatures Books of San Francisco, said it was his understanding that Gordon B. Hinckley, second counselor to Mormon Church President Spencer W. Kimball, purchased the letter in 1983 *in his own name* from collector Mark Hofmann. Hofmann declined comment,” italics added. “Mormon Linked to Folk Magic,” *Sun Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida), May 11, 1985, 5A. Compare also Marjorie Hyer, “Mormon Church Stirred by Prophet’s Letter; Document Suggests Element of Occult,” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), May 11, 1985, A3; John Dart, “Letter Revealing Mormon Founder’s Belief in Spirits, Occult Released,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California), May 11, 1985, 4. The misunderstanding about the letter’s path to Church ownership was clarified in a press statement from President Hinckley and Church spokesman Jerry Cahill, in which Cahill confirmed that President Hinckley had purchased the letter for the Church. See Dawn Tracy, “Smith Letter Seems to Have Disappeared from View,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah), April 29, 1985, B-1. A letter from Jerry Cahill confirmed that he had misspoken when he originally told Tracy that the Church did not have the letter. President Hinckley corrected Cahill, who was unaware of the acquisition, which had taken place in the office of the First Presidency. See “Church Has Letter,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 7, 1985.

29. Joseph Smith’s official account of his money-digging activities, now included in the LDS canon as Joseph Smith—History 1:56, states: “In the month of October 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stool. . . . He heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, . . . Pennsylvania After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands, to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent

story of my having been a money-digger.”

30. Richard N. Ostling and Christine Arrington, “Challenging Mormonism’s Roots,” *Time*, May 20, 1985, 44.

31. Peggy Fletcher Stack recalled: “These reporters would come and would want me to give them a primer in Mormonism.” Peggy Fletcher Stake, Interview by J. B. Haws, December 2008, 7, transcript in possession of the author. Jan Shippo recalled: “Peggy Stack . . . first put into words for me the dilemma the Hofmann story presented to newspaper editors and the supervisory staffs of other news organizations.” Shippo had just published a new book, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, in 1985, and she “started getting requests from reporters for phone interviews only one day after Hofmann’s arrest.” Shippo, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*, 105.

32. William Plummer and Carl Arrington, “Mysterious Bombings Kill Two in Salt Lake City—And Rock the Mormons,” *People Weekly*, November 4, 1985, 121; Amy Wilentz and Michael Riley, “Utah Docudrama: Murder Among the Mormons,” *Time*, October 28, 1985, 48. See also Jennet Conant and George Raine, “The Mormon Mystery,” *Newsweek*, October 28, 1985, 44. Only three weeks after the bombing, LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball died. News coverage of the appointment of his successor, Ezra Taft Benson, was filled with references to the Hofmann scandal. *Time* magazine reported: “Lately, [the Church] has been shaken by the mysterious bombing murders of two people connected with the sale of historical documents that cast doubts on official teachings about the origins of the Book of Mormon.” See Richard N. Ostling and Christine Arrington, “Awaiting the 13th Prophet,” *Time*, November 18, 1985, 85.

33. Robert Lindsey, “The Mormons: Growth, Prosperity, and Controversy,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1986, Section 6, 19.

34. LDS Apostle Dallin H. Oaks commented: “In a circumstance where The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could not say much without interfering with the pending criminal investigation and prosecution, the Church and its leaders have been easy marks for assertions and innuendo ranging from charges of complicity in murder to repeated recitals that the Church routinely acquires and suppresses Church history documents in order to deceive its members and the public.” Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” 63.

35. Joseph Carey, “A Time of Turmoil for Mormons,” *U. S. News and World Report*, April 28, 1986, 74. A paragraph later, the article revealed that “collector Mark Hofmann, charged in the deaths as well as forgeries of some church-related documents, is expected to go on trial this summer,” yet there was no indication that Hofmann was the source of the Salamander Letter, or that one of the forgery charges related to the Salamander Letter.

36. “During the month of January 1986, the Church turned all of its Hofmann-acquired documents over to the prosecutors, at their request. As a result, the Church could not make its Hofmann documents public to answer these innuendos of suppression without seeming to try to influence or impede the criminal investigation.” Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” 64.

37. See Turley, *Victims*, 310–13, for a discussion of Hofmann’s plea bargain and terms. See especially pages 479–80, n. 27, for statements by the prosecution that the Church was specifically not informed of the pending plea bargain to avoid the impression of Church influence on the decision. Importantly, these statements contradicted one of the principal premises of Naifeh and Smith’s *The Mormon Murders*, since they repeatedly argued that Church leaders pressured prosecutors to avoid a trial that could lead to potential embarrassment for the Church. See Naifeh and Smith, *The Mormon Murders*, 358, 407–08.

38. See Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” 63. In reviewing the episode over a decade later, Jan Shippo agreed that “national cover-

age (in contrast to most of the local Utah coverage) of the story contained an astonishing amount of innuendo associating Hofmann's plagiarism with Mormon beginnings. Myriad reports alleged secrecy and cover-up on the part of LDS general authorities." Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*, 108. A database search of ProQuest Newspapers for "Mark Hofmann" results in eighty-three articles that appeared in major newspapers from October to December 1985. The story made the front pages of the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Orlando Sentinel*, page two of the *San Diego Union* and the *Seattle Times*, and page 3 of the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Only ten articles in the database were devoted to Hofmann's plea. While that plea was front page news in the *San Diego Union* (January 23, 1987), and the *Los Angeles Times* (January 24, 1987), the irony is that one month later, the *Los Angeles Times* carried the first of a two-part series on Hofmann scandal. The announcement of Hofmann's plea and confession covered only 300 words; the "White Salamander Murders" piece 6,200 words. See Robert A. Jones, "The White Salamander Murders: The First of Two Parts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1987, 6. If readers did not see the second part of the series published a week later, they would have been left with this closing line: "Three bombs had exploded; two people were dead and one was in the hospital; the McLellan Collection had not been seen"—yet no mention that Hofmann had already confessed. Robert A. Jones, "The White Salamander Murders: The Second of Two Parts," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1987, 14.

39. Oaks described how "concerned readers wrote letters to the editor of the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*. They appealed to fairness, journalistic ethics, and the need for assurance that the press was not being exploited for selfish purposes. They asked the *Los Angeles Times* to print the known truth so its readers could evaluate the credibility of the paper's articles about the Oliver Cowdery history and the Church's alleged suppression of it. None of these letters was printed." Oaks, "Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents," 67.

40. See Dawn Tracy, "Hofmann Told Others He Was Shown Secret LDS History," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 17, 1986, C13.

41. Jones, "The White Salamander Murders: The First of Two Parts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1987, 6; "The White Salamander Murders: The Second of Two Parts," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1987, 14.

42. The retraction read: "Obviously like many others who had dealings with Hofmann, we were seriously misled. . . . In retrospect, it's clear we erred in publishing it without verifying Hofmann's story with another source." See "Tried to Kill Self, Mormon Artifacts Dealer Says," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1987, 29.

43. Curt Bench, Interview by J. B. Haws, February 10, 2010. In surveying four books written about the Hofmann murders, Jan Shipps said this about Mormon Murders: "From the standpoint of the Mormon image and most everything else, by far the worst of this quartet of books is the Mormon Murders" Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*, 106.

44. "LDS Official Denounces 'Scurrilous' Book: Says Misstatements in 'Mormon Murders' Leave Victims Defenseless," *Deseret News*, October 16, 1988.

45. Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*, 106.

46. Don Braunagel, "Story of Murders, Cover-up Implicates Mormon Church," *San Diego Tribune*, September 30, 1988, C3.

47. From the book's paperback cover; quoted in Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*, 106.

48. Jan Shipps, "The Salamander and the Saints," *Christian Century*, November 13, 1985, 1020.

49. The databases searched in December 2009 were ProQuest Newspapers, LexisNexis Academic, and the *New York Times*.

50. For an articulation of the individual versus institutional image situation in Mormonism, see James L. Clayton, "On the Different World of Utah: The Mormon Church," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, January 1986, 186.

51. John Ed Bradley, "BYU: Fourth-Ranked Cougars Are a Large Army of Do-rights Possessed with . . . Goodness," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1984, B1 and B7; Peter Bart, "Prigging Out," *Rolling Stone*, April 14, 1983, 89; italics added. See also D. Donahue, "Miss America Explains How and Why She Says No to Sex," *People Weekly*, November 26, 1984, 109, 111; Tom Callahan, "Cougars: 'We Are Too No. 1!,'" *Time*, December 31, 1984, 71.

52. Gary C. Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism: Seven Steps to Improve Our Image* (Orange, CA: The Parameter Foundation, 2008), 32, 34.