
The Utah War and Its Mountain Meadows Massacre: Lessons Learned, Surprises Encountered

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My remarks tonight were prompted by John Drayton's invitation for me to speak about the Utah War of 1857–58, the 150th anniversary of which is now being commemorated. After I accepted, the thought struck me that tonight's session would be all the richer if I could bring with me Richard E. (Rick) Turley Jr., the LDS Church's assistant church historian and recorder, joint author of the recently published book *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), and one of the leading authorities on the massacre, the war's principal atrocity. John and then Rick readily agreed to this format, and so here we are.

We'll now just chat somewhat informally. The style and tone are not intended to be adversarial but rather those of two friends and colleagues respectfully discussing interrelated events from somewhat different experiences and perspectives. Our aim is not to win an argument but to shed light (rather than

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generate heat) about *what* happened 150 years ago, *why*, and with *what consequences*. Our focus will be on the principal lessons we have learned about the Utah War and its Mountain Meadows massacre. We will also share with you some of the surprises encountered along the way—both from our research and the dialogue flowing from the public’s reaction to the books that the two of us have just published.

For Rick Turley and me, it has been a long journey in quite different ways. My interest in the Utah War started exactly a half century ago in New Haven, Connecticut, when I was an undergraduate surrounded not only by Gothic architecture, gargoyles, and moats, but an extraordinary trove of unexploited manuscripts in the Yale Collection of Western Americana. In Rick’s case, his journey, rooted in decades of interest in and responsibility for Mormon history, began in earnest nearly a decade ago along the Wasatch Front in the Salt Lake City headquarters of the LDS Church’s Historical Department. Strange bedfellows? I suppose we are, yet Rick and I have become close friends as well as collaborators. I suspect that this relationship flows in part from our differences as well as from a common determination that civility of discourse rather than raw antagonism is what this subject needs after 150 years of controversy and conflict. In thinking about the diversity of our experiences, I note that three weeks ago Rick found himself in northwest Arkansas meeting with descendants of the Mountain Meadows victims. On the same day I, a Presbyterian originally from upstate New York, found myself afoot in Utah climbing to the stand of the Logan Mormon Tabernacle to deliver a lecture in honor of Leonard J. Arrington, late historian of the LDS Church. And here we are tonight—me in another LDS stake center and Rick Turley, the pride of New York’s Oxford University Press, hard in the lee of my publisher, the University of Oklahoma Press and its venerable Arthur H. Clark Company imprint. What an opportunity! Our cup runneth over.

Now on to the Utah War. In thinking about lessons I’ve learned from my fifty years of research, it is a little difficult to separate lessons from surprises encountered. So perhaps instead of trying to compartmentalize the two rigorously, I will simply deal with them together as I go along, noting where I encountered something that for me was really unexpected.

The Utah War: Still Unknown but Emerging

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned about the Utah War is that few Americans have even heard of it, let alone understood it. There is a sort of national amnesia about this part of our history, prompted in part by the enormity of the Civil War that followed four years later, and partly by embarrassment over the conflict in both the Mormon Church and the U.S. Army for

different reasons. This lesson came home to me not only during my visit to Logan, Utah, on September 25, but also on September 20, when I spoke at a James Buchanan symposium in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My hope is that what you hear tonight will prompt you to explore this colorful, admittedly off-beat subject a bit more.

So what was the Utah War? In one sense it was President James Buchanan's effort to replace Brigham Young as governor of Utah Territory and to install his successor with an army escort of 2,500 troops, a change that Young resisted with guerrilla tactics until a settlement was reached a year later in 1858. Over the years I have come to define it more formally as the armed confrontation over power and authority during 1857–58 between the civil-religious leadership of Utah Territory, led by Governor Brigham Young, and the administration of President James Buchanan—a conflict that pitted perhaps the nation's largest, most experienced territorial militia (the Nauvoo Legion) against an expeditionary force that ultimately grew to involve almost one-third of the U.S. Army. It was the nation's most extensive and expensive military undertaking during the period between the Mexican and Civil Wars. In my view, what it was *not* was a crusade against Mormonism to eradicate polygamy—the principle and practice were not illegal in 1857, and President Buchanan, a pretty good lawyer, went out of his way to make that point. Neither was it a campaign to suppress a Mormon “rebellion,” a term that Buchanan used only cautiously and that I never use, although I must say that at the point at which Governor Young declared martial law, forbade free transit within and across Utah, and issued orders to kill U.S. Army officers and their mountaineer guides, it becomes more difficult to avoid the “R” word.

For those of you unfamiliar with this conflict, I realize that this is a less than complete definition of the war, but hopefully it is enough to start us along.

Labels and Language Matter

When I started down this road in 1958, I used the term “Utah Expedition” for not only the U.S. Army brigade commanded by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, but also for the conflict to which the Buchanan administration committed it. Decades later my collaborator, the late Professor Richard D. Poll of Provo, led me to an understanding that that label—“Utah Expedition”—overlooks the fact that there was a large group of people engaged on the other side who had nothing to do with the army, specifically Utah Territory's Mormon population. So since then I have been using “Utah War,” and have reserved “Utah Expedition” solely for the federal side. The flip side of this one-sidedness is the use of the term “Johnston's Army,” an ethnocentric label used

primarily in Utah and few other places. To me it is an understandable but unfortunate term that trivializes and personalizes the war in much the same way that “Seward’s Folly” was once used to diminish the federal government’s purchase of Alaska for \$7.2 million. I was surprised to learn that the participants did not even use the term “Johnston’s Army.” It took root in Mormon Utah only decades later for political and cultural reasons.

While we are on the subject of labels, I would note that within the institutional army there is an aversion to using the term “war” for this conflict. The military prefers to call it a “campaign” or an “expedition.” The army’s logic is that there was neither a congressional declaration of war, nor pitched battles between massed troops and wholesale bloodletting on the scale of the Civil War battles. Quite true, but I continue to think that “war” is an appropriate, common-sense term—as with the way we talk about the Indian wars in this part of the country. After all, consider the following. Camp Floyd, situated forty miles southwest of Salt Lake City, was at that time the nation’s largest army garrison; the confrontation was so costly that it virtually bankrupted the U.S. Treasury and devastated Utah’s economy; its financing forced the resignation of the Secretary of War; the war’s “Move South”—an effort to flee the approaching army—put thirty thousand Mormon refugees on the road from northern Utah to Provo and perhaps beyond; Brigham Young and scores of others were indicted by a federal grand jury for treason; and the Mountain Meadows massacre alone, the conflict’s greatest atrocity, was the nation’s worst incident of organized mass murder of unarmed civilians in the nation’s history until the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. So for me, “Utah War” is a good enough working descriptor.

The War’s Origins and Conclusion

One of my other foundational conclusions is that the war did not just well up one spring day in 1857 soon after President Buchanan’s inauguration because of a single critical incident. Neither did it end when most people think of it as concluding—on June 26, 1858, the day that Albert Sidney Johnston and his troops marched into and through Salt Lake City to establish Camp Floyd. Instead, the confrontation was nearly ten years in the making, with Mormon-federal relations—already poor before the 1847 LDS arrival in the Salt Lake Valley—steadily deteriorating immediately thereafter. By Buchanan’s inauguration on March 4, 1857, virtually every interface between the territorial and federal governments had become a battleground—the selection and performance of mail contractors; relations with and allegiances of Utah’s Indian tribes; matters of land ownership and the accuracy of federal surveys; financial stewardship of congressional appropriations for the territory; the ad-

ministration of Utah's federal courts and criminal justice system; and perhaps most important, the background, competence, and behavior of appointees to federal office in Utah. In addition to these administrative or governmental pinch points, there were highly public upsets over other incidents, such as the 1852 announcement of the principle of plural marriage; the uneven treatment of non-Mormon emigrants passing through Utah to the Pacific Coast; responsibility for the massacre of the U.S. Army's Gunnison Expedition in 1853; a series of other uninvestigated, unprosecuted murders; repeated congressional rejection of statehood for Deseret; and a related controversy over whether Brigham Young was or was not seeking Mormon independence outside the Union. At the heart of these clashes was the disconnect implicit in two conflicting philosophies of governance—Brigham Young's vision of Utah as a millennially oriented theocracy operating under his autocratic leadership on the one hand; and on the other, the U.S. government's view of Utah as just another federal territory intended to function under republican principles and responsive to Congress through a federally sworn governor whose term of office, in Brigham Young's case, had run out in 1854.

It was surprising to me to discover that, despite this background of seriously deteriorating relations, as Buchanan became president "the Mormon problem" was not a front-rank issue for the nation, preoccupied as it was with the slavery issue and civil turmoil in Utah's eastern neighbor, Kansas Territory. Reflecting these priorities, Buchanan's inaugural address made no reference to Utah, Mormons, polygamy, or Brigham Young. For those who would point to the 1856 platform plank of the new Republican party—drafted to advocate the eradication of polygamy and slavery as "the twin relics of barbarism" as a critical incident—I would note that as one gets into the origins of that plank one will discover that it was the result not of an anti-Mormon political groundswell, but rather the somewhat isolated, even casual, work of a single California delegate to the Republicans' Philadelphia convention—John A. Wills—who later confessed that he thought of the polygamy issue one morning as he strolled to the convention hall. John C. Fremont, the Republican presidential nominee, never used this provocative slogan in his campaigning, and in fact, he felt that he owed his life and that of his exploring expedition to the Utah Mormons who came to their aid when they stumbled out of the mountains in desperate shape during the winter of 1852–53.

With respect to the war's conclusion, it is fair to say that the "active" phase ended with the army's passage through Salt Lake City, but on that same day—with a petition to President Buchanan signed by Brigham Young and the entire Church leadership—the confrontation morphed or changed shape from a military conflict into a political-cultural struggle that took decades to run its course. The war unleashed a wide range of societal forces—political,

religious, economic, and even geographic—that among other things barred statehood for Utah until 1896. In some cases the issues set in motion by these forces are still unresolved today. For example, I would say that today’s Sagebrush Rebellion in the West is in many ways a downstream by-product of the Utah War. Ask yourself why, in 1996, President Bill Clinton felt it best to announce his unilateral, highly unpopular creation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument not in southern Utah—where the new park was to be located and where local residents muttered to New York newspaper reporters about “Johnston’s Army”—but rather from the relative political safety of northern Arizona.

Even as I look at this year’s presidential campaign I see lingering connections to the Utah War. My favorite example of this linkage runs to the remarkable story of a soldier who served on both sides of that conflict, U.S. Army Private Charles Henry Wilcken. Wilcken enlisted in a federal artillery regiment soon after arriving in New York from Germany during the spring of 1857, and by the fall he found himself in the midst of the army’s Utah Expedition. Near the Mormon trading post of Fort Bridger, Wilcken deserted, crossed into the Nauvoo Legion’s lines, converted to Mormonism, and eventually became the bodyguard, coachman, nurse, and pallbearer for Presidents John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff as well as the adopted son of Apostle George Q. Cannon. Oh, yes—Wilcken also became the grandfather of George Wilcken Romney, who ran for president in 1968, and the great-grandfather of Mitt Romney, one of this year’s presidential candidates.

It Takes Two to Tango: Leader Accountability and Responsibility

During the course of my research into the papers of Brigham Young and James Buchanan, I came to realize that the war was far more complex than the picture I first encountered of it as “Buchanan’s Blunder,” a sort of cartoonish, one-dimensional portrayal of “Old Buck” as a hapless, doddering bachelor cast as a sheriff of Nottingham in pursuit of a nimble, much-married Brigham Young’s Robin Hood. I came to realize that, notwithstanding Buchanan’s multiple misjudgments, this one-sided view of him was largely the result of a very effective, fascinating Mormon effort to seize the moral high ground immediately after the war in the context of the national controversy over Buchanan’s handling of the southern secession crisis and the treasonous decision of his vice president and several cabinet secretaries to become Confederate generals. By the end of the nineteenth century, this image campaign had produced a view of the Utah War as what has come to be called Buchanan’s Blunder, much as, at about the same time, a group of former Confederate generals worked effectively to fabricate the “Myth of the Lost Cause.” Under this

latter campaign the Civil War was repackaged by former Confederates as the “War Between the States,” a conflict fought not to preserve chattel slavery, but rather for a higher motive—to protect a noble, agrarian way of life from the onslaught of the grasping, materialistic industrialists of the North. In the process, the images of both Brigham Young and Robert E. Lee underwent a radical transformation from what they had been in 1858 and 1865. For example, in the case of Lee, whose son “Rooney” had dropped out of Harvard in May 1857 to join the Utah Expedition’s Sixth U.S. Infantry, it was a virtual canonization. Interestingly, for Lee this process involved, among other measures, the expurgation of several unseemly anti-Mormon comments from his letters before their publication.

If Buchanan had made mistakes aplenty, so too had Brigham Young. In Buchanan’s case he knew shockingly little in 1857 about either conditions in Utah or Brigham Young’s likely reaction to his removal as governor. Compounding this serious shortfall in intelligence was a series of horrible selection decisions—the appointment of a homicidal, ham-handed Brevet Brigadier General William S. Harney as the Utah Expedition’s initial commander, and Alfred Cumming, an inexperienced four-hundred-pound alcoholic, as Young’s successor. These were appointments that bring to mind the old lesson about nothing being as expensive as bad management.

In Young’s case, the biggest, most costly blunder was the miscalculation by which for years he indulged in hostile, violent rhetoric as governor, behavior that brought down on him and his people needlessly the full force of the U.S. government. As a result, Utah and Mormonism changed forever. In the process, as Rick Turley’s and my book illustrate, the Utah Territory for which Brigham Young was responsible as governor, U.S. superintendent of Indian affairs, and militia commander, as well as prophet, seer, and revelator, took on a tone in which violence welled up, including the Mountain Meadows massacre. This atrocity not only took the lives of 120 innocent children, women, and disarmed men but stained the reputations of generations of uninvolved Mormons and their Church. It was a tragedy unbelievably costly in multiple ways. As I see it, the “Move South”—frequently portrayed as a brilliant public relations gambit by Brigham Young to gain Eastern sympathy—was another huge mistake that disrupted Utah’s economy for years and required enormous sacrifices from Mormon families, especially their womenfolk. Whoever later coined the aphorism that Texas is hell on horses and women had not seen Utah during the summer of 1858.

So my take is that both leaders—Brigham Young as well as James Buchanan—blundered and were accountable for the Utah War and its violence, but in unequal and quite different ways. That is not the same thing as saying a plague on both the White House and the Lion House. One of the principal

lessons here is the old one about the impossibility of serving effectively two masters—as in Brigham Young’s case, when he eagerly sought to serve simultaneously both the federal government, in a myriad of overlapping civil and military roles, as well as his church as its supreme religious leader. This was a hopeless conflict of interest, and it all came crashing down with tragic results and consequences during 1857–58.

Geography Matters: The War’s Impact and Consequences

I mentioned earlier that the Utah War unleashed a series of societal forces, including geography, that in many ways are still playing out today. Four graphic examples quickly come to mind, all of which are loaded with surprises.

First, the Utah Territory to which President Buchanan dispatched troops in 1857 was not today’s familiar, near-rectangular entity, but rather an enormous, sprawling territory that stretched from Kansas and the Continental Divide on the east, to the California border on the west. Some of Utah’s initial counties were more than six hundred miles wide. In the decade following the Utah War, partly as a sort of congressional payback, Utah lost a huge portion of her territory in six “bites” to form and enlarge Nevada, Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming. James Buchanan’s last official act was to sign the enabling legislation that carved Nevada and Colorado out of a politically vulnerable Utah’s western and eastern flanks. The Utah War had geographic as well as military consequences.

Second, the U.S. Army’s Ives Expedition of topographical engineers, assigned in 1857 to ascend the Colorado River from the Gulf of California to find its head of navigation and determine whether the Colorado might be a shorter, less expensive way of injecting troops and supplies into southern Utah, stumbled into what we today call the Grand Canyon. What a discovery!

Third, as the Ives Expedition steamed up the Colorado in December 1857 in support of Albert Sidney Johnston, Russian Tsar Alexander II was worrying in St. Petersburg about rumors afield on the Pacific Coast. The speculation was that Brigham Young was planning to lead a mass exodus out of Utah to a refuge on the Pacific Coast, such as Russian America. Acutely aware of the difficulty of defending this vast, distant region and conscious of the seizure by other Americans only a few years earlier of Mexican Texas and Alta California (including Utah), Alexander authorized the beginning of negotiations that led to the 1867 American purchase of Alaska.

Finally, worried about the same rumors but concerned that the Mormon target was Vancouver’s Island rather than Russian America, Queen Victoria’s

government in London took steps to remove its Pacific Coast possessions from the ineffective administration of the Hudson's Bay Company. It then established the more defensible crown colony of British Columbia in June 1858.

Reflecting these four little vignettes and others, I now appreciate even more one of the principal tenets of The Arthur H. Clark Company's *Kingdom in the West* series of books—that the story of the Mormon experience on the American frontier is not just one of a Utah adventure but rather a story with regional (western) and even international sweep.

Colorful Characters on Both Sides

Among my most delightful surprises in digging through mounds of Utah War records was the realization that on both sides of the conflict were dozens of colorful people whose extraordinary later lives have somehow become disconnected in American history from an awareness of the impact of their youthful, formative Utah War experiences. I only have time to mention a few of my favorite examples.

First, I want to go back to Robert E. Lee's son, "Rooney," whom I suppose I could call the Harvard drop out. Within a few years he was no longer a second lieutenant in the Sixth U.S. Infantry in Utah, but rather the youngest major general in the Confederate States Army. When young General Lee's destiny led to his capture on a Virginia battlefield by a Union Army lieutenant colonel of the Pennsylvania cavalry, who would that officer have been? It was Samuel P. Spear, formerly the tough sergeant-major of the Second U.S. Dragoons, who recognized Rooney Lee from their Utah Expedition days. Spear, by the way, was a man who despite his rough, frontier background, went on to become a brigadier general and, after the Civil War, the leader of the Fenian invasion of Quebec from Vermont.

On the Mormon side, I was startled to find Ogden resident Jonathan Browning, one of the West's premier gunsmith's and *pater familias* of what would later become America's most famous firearms dynasty. In Yale's Beinecke Library I found a fascinating December 1857 letter in which Jonathan Browning offered the Nauvoo Legion the design of an innovative aerial torpedo for use in exploding army ammunition wagons. Browning offered this design at roughly the same time that Brigham Young was writing to the same Legion commander to advocate the use of medieval long-bows and cross-bows for mountain warfare. What a contrast! It is ironic that the company later founded by Browning's sons produced or licensed virtually every automatic weapon used by U.S. armed forces from the late 1800s through World War II.

From Sergeant-Major Samuel Spear's Second Dragoons also emerged Private John Jerome ("Johnny") Healy, who post-war became the sheriff of Fort Benton, Montana, a founder of Alberta's notorious, whiskey-soaked "Fort Whoop-Up," coiner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's unofficial motto ("They always get their man"), a trading and transportation magnate for Chicago's Cudahy family during the Yukon gold rush of the 1890s, the model for a central figure in Jack London's first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows*, and the failed developer of a subterranean railroad tunnel to connect Siberia and Alaska beneath the Bering Straits.

Finally, I would mention that there is even an Oklahoma component to these fascinating stories of frontier legends who served in Utah. I have in mind Private Benjamin Harrison Clark of the Utah Expedition's volunteer battalion. After his Utah service, Clark enlisted in the Union Army, drifted south, married into the Cheyenne tribe and learned its language before becoming one of the outstanding army guides and interpreters out of Fort Sill during the brutal campaigns of the 1860s on the south plains for Generals Custer, Sherman, Sheridan, and Miles. When he died in 1913, Ben Clark was the caretaker for Fort Reno, Oklahoma, a post named to honor the Utah Expedition's ordnance chief, Captain Jesse L. Reno, who died in the Civil War as a major general with brave old Barbara Fritchie's famous American flag stuffed in his saddle bags.

We will leave to another day the colorful story of Jenny Goodale, a Shoshone who was the lone woman to accompany Captain Randolph B. Marcy on his epic march from Fort Bridger to New Mexico and back during the winter of 1857–58. She took part in what became the most arduous winter march in American military history. Jenny Goodale held up and survived under conditions so brutal that when Marcy's starving, exhausted detachment emerged from the New Mexico mountains, one of his sergeants gorged himself to death. What a story!

The Complexities of Messrs. Young and Kane

One of the more important lessons about the Utah War that I learned was how complex both Brigham Young and his close non-Mormon friend Thomas L. Kane were as individuals. From my comments of a moment ago you will recognize that I came to develop an understanding of some of the flat spots in Brigham Young's style and decision-making. At the same time, I also came to realize that alongside the rough and sometimes brutal side of his behavior there was also a pastoral, empathetic side to his leadership. So too with Kane, a key figure in settling the Utah War who was not only courageous, noble, and philanthropic—a man who did more for the Church than perhaps any other

nonmember, but who was also self-promoting and at times manipulative and cynical. My favorite example of this darker side of his psyche runs to Kane's introduction of Governor Cumming, Brigham Young's successor. As a good Church historian, George A. Smith recorded that "Col. Kane visited Gov. Young [and] told him that he had caught the fish, now you can cook it as he had a mind to." If Messrs. Young and Kane were not the odd couple, they were a complex pair whose actions and intent cannot always be taken at face value by historians, as Alfred Cumming and James Buchanan also were to learn.

Myth Verses Realities

Like all other American military conflicts, the Utah War, both sides of it, spawned myths and legends—plenty of them. Much to my surprise I have come to realize that many of these are true, while still others are at least partially so. It is a finding that has brought me to a new respect for oral traditions and folklore. The story of the U. S. Marine Corps' 2d Lieutenant Robert L. Browning is one of these. For 150 years the corps' headquarters at the Washington Navy Yard has nurtured the unverified story that an unidentified Marine officer had accompanied Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah Expedition west. Now we know that the legend was true and that Marine Lieutenant Browning was the man, a refugee from a court-martial at the Boston Navy Yard and the wrath of an incompatible skipper. Another legend, that the Nauvoo Legion used silver bullets during the Utah War, falls under the sort-of-true category. Some folklorists believe that this tale even took on a later life to become incorporated into the story of the Lone Ranger and his silver bullets as it took to the airwaves in the late 1930s from radio station WXYZ in Detroit. Flatly untrue was the self-promoting myth that Buffalo Bill Cody invented in the 1870s to claim that he had participated in the Utah War as an eleven-year-old assistant teamster protected at Fort Bridger by Wild Bill Hickok.

Finally, one of the strongest, almost universally accepted myths of the Utah War was that it was a bloodless conflict—an expensive, harmless campaign without casualties. This is perhaps the most significant myth of the conflict. Alas, I must report that it is untrue, and that there was a substantial amount of bloodshed during the confrontation. Not on the scale of the Civil War, of course, but roughly on a par with the loss of life during the mid-to-late 1850s in Utah's neighbor to the east, a frontier territory which earned the enduring nickname "Bleeding Kansas." I found that when it came to bloodshed and setting it in motion, neither the Mormon Nauvoo Legion nor the federal Utah Expedition had clean hands during 1857–58.