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## The Mormon Plot that Wasn't

Nathan B. Oman

*William & Mary Law School*, nboman@wm.edu

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## DAILY NEWS

## OPINION

## The Mormon plot that wasn't

Fears that a Romney presidency might empower the LDS are baseless

BY NATHAN B. OMAN / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Mitt Romney, with his wife Ann and Utah Sen. Bob Bennett, at the funeral services for Gordon B. Hinckley, former leader of the Church of Latter-day Saints, in February 2008.

Mitt Romney's Mormonism will be an issue in the general election, if he gets there as widely expected. The media have focused on skepticism among conservative evangelicals, who regard Mormonism as a cult, but secularists also have worries, fearing that Romney is the tool of Mormon theocracy.

Such concerns, however, misunderstand the lessons of Mormon history — mistaking century-old church conflicts for modern Mormon beliefs.

In a recent Salon article entitled "Romney at the White Horse Prophecy," for example, Sally Denton argued that Romney sees the presidency as a religious office to be occupied as part of a broader Mormon agenda to rule over America. Somewhat less hysterically, Damon Linker, editor at Newsweek and The Daily Beast, argues in his book "The Religious Test" that devout Mormonism is inconsistent with high office because Latter-day Saints owe ultimate allegiance to the church's president, whom they sustain as a "living prophet."

Likewise, some have seen Romney's generous tithing donations to the Mormon Church — more than \$4 million in his recently released tax returns — as evidence he is too beholden to the church's hierarchy.

A shallow understanding of Mormon history gives such concerns a superficial plausibility. Like many 19th century Americans, early Mormons expected the imminent end of the world. In this view, the United States government — like all governments — was doomed to fail when Jesus Christ returned shortly to usher in the kingdom of God.

But of course, that didn't happen. The predicted apocalypse did not materialize.

When the world failed to end immediately, violent persecution also came to define Mormon attitudes toward America. That persecution left lasting bitterness and resulted in the exodus of the Latter-day Saints to the Far West, where they sought to create a utopian commonwealth in Utah.

That commonwealth, called "Zion" or "Deseret" by the Mormons, openly clashed with the government during

the so-called Utah War of 1857 and, later, during the massive legal crusade against polygamy in the 1880s.

In 1890, the Mormons surrendered, publicly abandoning polygamy and their hope for an independent Zion. Utah was admitted as a state a few years later.

This is the history on which alarmists like Denton rely when they claim that Romney's candidacy is part of some sinister Mormon plot. As Alexander Pope reminds us, however, "a little learning is a dangerous thing." What the alarmists miss is the 122 years of Mormon history since the 1890 capitulation.

In 1902, Utah elected Reed Smoot to be its U.S. senator. Unlike Romney, who temporarily occupied positions of local church leadership in Boston, Smoot was a Mormon apostle, a life-long member of the church's second-highest governing council. Activists and journalists insisted that Mormon theocracy was again rearing its head and that Smoot would take political orders from church leaders.

The result was a four-year congressional investigation of Mormonism. Ultimately, church President Joseph F. Smith appeared before the Senate. He disclaimed any theocratic agenda; he insisted that Mormons were loyal citizens of the U.S., and he pledged that the church would not direct or seek to dominate Mormons elected to political office.

We now have more than a century of experience with that pledge. While the church occasionally acts politically — as do all American denominations — it has abided by Smith's promise. Robert Bennett, for example, a former three-term Republican senator from Utah and a practicing Mormon, insists that in 18 years in office, church leaders never instructed him on how to vote on a single issue. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader in the Senate and a Mormon, says the same thing.

Prior to the Vatican II council of the 1960s, the Catholic Church was formally opposed to many of the core features of liberal democracy, such as religious freedom. Given historical experience, however, it's ridiculous to imagine a believing Catholic like Joe Biden as part of a subversive Roman agenda.

Seeing Romney's candidacy as a Mormon plot is equally outlandish. We now have twice as much experience with post-Smoot Mormonism as we have with post-Vatican II Catholicism.

The alarmism of Denton and Linker ignores that experience, trading on out-of-date stereotypes. History, alas, tells a far less sensational story about Romney's faith.

Oman is an associate professor of law at the College of William & Mary in Virginia.