Mormons' relationship with America: It's complicated

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS)—When it comes to flag-waving, Mormons may outdo many of their neighbors to express their outsized patriotism. Love of America, they believe, stretches beyond appreciation and gratitude. It is theological, prescribed in holy writ.
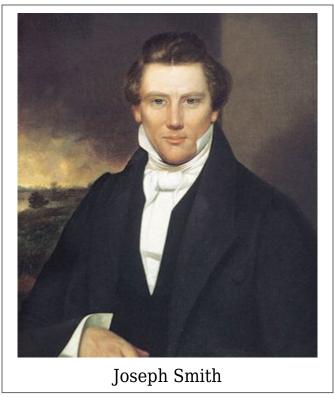
When it comes to American exceptionalism, Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said, "Mormons sort of have an extra chromosome."

Presidential candidate Mitt Romney repeatedly lauds the crucial role this country has to play in human history. "I am one of those who believes America is destined to remain as it has been since the birth of the republic," Romney wrote in his book *[No Apology: The Case for American Greatness](#)*, "the brightest hope of the world."

The Republican presidential candidate asserts the country has declined because President Obama doesn't share his vaulted view. Alluding to a biblical metaphor, Romney has said, the "light from that shining city (on a hill) has dimmed over the last three years, and I will help restore it."

Other Mormons caution against linking political perspectives on American exceptionalism to specific theology or teachings.

Mormon views run the gamut—from believing that this nation is distinctive to seeing it as better than others, said Brigham Young University political scientist [Quin Monson](#). "I don't think the church's position on the divine origins of the U.S. Constitution and teaching that America is a special place have really clear implications for policy."

Joseph Smith

Besides, Mormons aren't the only ones who see a transcendent mission for the United States. Many other politicians, including Marco Rubio, Paul Ryan and Rick Santorum, see it much the same way.

In political terms, American exceptionalism has come to mean, according to an article in Foreign Policy magazine, that "the United States—and the United States alone—(is meant) to lead, save, liberate and ultimately transform the world."

That perspective fits some elements of LDS theology, but not others.

The real story of Mormons and the United States is complicated—even contradictory.

This country gave birth to their religion but saw the murder of their prophet amid his presidential campaign. The First Amendment provided shelter for their faith, but it couldn't protect them from wholesale expulsions across the Midwest. Their signature scripture trumpets the promise of America, but it is filled with the pain of a fallen nation.

Today, the Utah-based faith is growing more rapidly outside the United States than in it, which makes it essential for the church to play down its Americanness. Zion, the church now teaches, can be anywhere the faithful gather and worship.

Since its founding in 1830, Mormonism has been seen as the quintessential American faith.

After all, it was launched on United States soil, and its sacred text, the Book of Mormon, tells the story of a band of Israelites who sailed to the New World. After his death in Jerusalem, the Mormon scripture says, Jesus brought his redeeming doctrines to the Americas.

Church founder Joseph Smith taught that Missouri was home to the Garden of Eden of the past and the New Jerusalem of the future. It is, he preached, where Jesus will return.

Latter-day Saints also regard the U.S. Constitution as an inspired document and the nation's founding as a pivotal step in the unfolding of God's plan to restore true Christianity to the Earth.

Throughout early Mormon history, however, this country was not always a haven for Smith and his followers.

"America is a land of promise (in the Book of Mormon)—until it's not," Utah State University historian Philip Barlow said. "The narrative tells of recurrent departures from peoples and lands grown degenerate in affluence, arrogance, injustice and lust for war."

Many of those Latter-day Saints pushing American exceptionalism "forget the Book of Mormon is a tale of woe about America, full of warnings," said American religion scholar Kathleen Flake, who teaches at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. "They've completely lost the sensibility of first-generation Mormons who believed that America was indicted for having

killed the prophet" Smith.

They also misread Smith's statements about God's hand in the founding of America, which were not narrowly focused on the United States, she notes.

For early Mormons, the prophet's discussion of America was meant to include "the Western Hemisphere in salvation history, not limited to 30 guys writing a document in the last third of the 18th century," she said.

When the beleaguered band of believers were pushed out of their homes in the Midwest, they wanted to flee America.

"It is with the greatest joy that I forsake this republic," Mormon apostle Orson Pratt wrote in 1845. "If our Heavenly Father will deliver us out of the hands of the blood-thirsty Christians of these United States and not suffer any more of us to be martyred to gratify their holy piety, I for one shall be very thankful."

On July 4, 1885, Mormon pioneers lowered the American flag at Salt Lake City's Temple Square and church-owned businesses to half-staff to protest federal encroachment on their religious liberties.

After Utah statehood in 1896, though, Mormons became superpatriots to show the country their loyalty. By the 1960s, then-LDS apostle Ezra Taft Benson declared: "With all my heart, I love our great nation. ... This is part of my religious faith."