

The Reed Smoot Senate Investigation: The Trial of the Mormon Church

General Introduction

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At the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) in April of 1900, a young, middle-aged man by the name of Reed Smoot was sustained by the church membership as a new member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a high ranking body of twelve men in the church. This body of men, along with the First Presidency, the First Quorum of Seventy, the Presiding Bishopric, and the Patriarch to the Church comprised the General Authorities of the church, the general hierarchy by which the church is governed. Because of this appointment, Reed Smoot and the Mormon Church would become the subject of a four-year investigation into the beliefs and practices of this religious organization by the United States Senate.

Prior to becoming a member of the Twelve, Reed Smoot was active in state politics. He was a loyal Republican and was a noted leader of that party in Utah. With a majority of Republicans elected to the state legislature in the Fall of 1902, and Reed Smoot being the most prominent member of the Republican leadership, he was a natural choice of the party to be their candidate for U.S. Senator. Reed Smoot agreed to be the Republican nominee for senator after obtaining permission to seek the office from the First Presidency and his fellow members of the Twelve. A few years previous, problems had arisen among the church leadership when Elders Moses Thatcher and B.H. Roberts, of the Quorum of the Twelve and the Quorum of the Seventy respectively, ran for national offices without informing their associates of their political intentions and were severely reproved for not gaining the approval of the First Presidency and the Twelve. Upon becoming a general authority, men like Reed Smoot were expected to devote their entire energies to their ecclesiastical callings rather than focusing their interests in areas political or otherwise. However, through what became known as "The Political Rule

of the Church," issued on 11 April 1896, church leaders could seek political offices if the other general authorities granted them permission, and by so doing, relieved them temporarily of their church responsibilities. Reed Smoot obtained such permission and was elected by the state legislature on 20 January 1903, as the junior senator from Utah.

Within six days after his election to office, a formal protest of senator-elect Smoot's election was issued by eighteen non-Mormon men in Salt Lake City stating such a man as Reed Smoot should not be eligible for his senatorial seat because, he, being a member of the ruling authorities of the Mormon Church, "shape[s] the belief and control[s] the conduct of those under them in all matters whatsoever, civil and religious, temporal and spiritual...." In other words, the church in Utah dominated the state in areas which were also political, therefore, there was no such thing as "separation of church and state." Another major charge was made stating that since the Manifesto was issued in 1890 which prohibited any further polygamous marriages by the church, violations had occurred and plural marriages had been performed since 1890. And finally, although church members and especially church leaders were married to several wives before the Manifesto, they continued to cohabit with these wives. These and other more minor charges were being raised against Elder Smoot and the church in hopes that he would not be seated based upon the idea that since he was a high-ranking official in a church which had such practices, he was not fit for the senatorial seat. These charges were published in newspapers throughout the U.S. and by the time Reed Smoot arrived in Washington D.C. with his certificate of election, he and his church had become the center of attention on the national scene. As we review the past and the outcome of the senate hearings surrounding Senator Smoot, the investigation shifts not only into the life of Reed Smoot but into the teachings of the Mormon Church. The Mormon Church also takes the witness stand.

In 1896, B.H. Roberts, who was a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, was elected to the House of Representatives by the people of Utah and in a manner which would be similar to Reed Smoot's election seven years later, there was much public outcry against Elder Roberts being seated because he was a polygamist. Elder Roberts was denied his seat in the House on these grounds. Reed Smoot, on the other hand, was not a polygamist nor had he ever entered into such a practice, therefore; it was determined by the senate that he be given his seat, but an investigation into the charges would be shortcoming. On 16 January 1904, the Smoot hearings were opened in what was to be a two-and-a-half year investigation. The investigation was to be conducted by the Committee on Privileges and Elections and through the years of investigation, thirteen senators would hear arguments and testimony concerning the truths and falsehoods of the charges which would later fill four volumes containing some 3,429 pages.

As the hearings progressed, it became evident that the issues centered on the beliefs and practices of the Mormon Church, but, since Reed Smoot was a member of the Mormon hierarchy, these issues were applicable to him in his battle to keep his seat. The witnesses consisted of both non-Mormon and Mormons, but foremost among the witnesses were the church leaders who were summoned to testify. Among those summoned were: B.H. Roberts of the Quorum of Seventy; John Henry Smith and Francis M. Lyman, both fellow members of the Quorum of the Twelve; Moses Thatcher, now a former member of the Twelve; and most noted of all, Joseph F. Smith, the President of the Church.

The testimonies of the witnesses no doubt shocked the Washington diplomats, mainly because they were unaware of the details concerning the practices of the church, especially that of polygamy. Polygamy became the major issue of the hearings. Although it was confirmed that there had been a few isolated cases of plural marriages being entered into since the Manifesto was issued stating there would be no more such marriages authorized by the church, what alarmed these congressmen and others