

America in the Mormon imagination

GLENN BECK, CLEON SKOUSEN, AMERIGO VESPUCCI & ME

By Eric Samuelsen

IN THE PROVO TOWNE CENTRE MALL, THE McNaughton Fine Art Gallery sells nicely framed prints of the paintings of LDS artist Jon McNaughton, most of whose works—landscapes, windmills, lighthouses—suggest that he's a Mormon answer to Thomas Kinkade. One painting, however, really stands out. Called “One Nation Under God,” it’s a painting of Jesus—who to me sort of looks like Matthew McConaughey—holding a copy of the United States Constitution. You can see it interactively at http://www.mcnaughtonart.com/artwork/view_zoom/?artpiece_id=353#.

Behind Jesus are certain figures from the American past: George Washington's just off Jesus's left shoulder. James Madison's off his right shoulder. In front of Jesus are two other groups of people: sheep and goats, perhaps. On Jesus's left hand, a shadowy Satan looms over seven iconic figures: a liberal journalist, a professor, a Supreme Court justice, a lawyer, a politician, a Hollywood producer, and a pregnant woman, who, we're told on the website, is contemplating terminating her pregnancy. The professor is holding a book: Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The Supreme Court Justice has dropped papers which, the website explains, are the texts of certain Court decisions. They're a strange collection of decisions. *Roe v. Wade* seems inevitable, but *Marbury v. Madison*? Jesus has a problem with judicial review?

I've talked this painting up a bit among friends and colleagues, and a number of them have checked it out, either online or in person. We all think it's pretty funny: such a perfect illustration of current obsessions and anxieties of the American Right. The Hollywood producer is a particular favorite: my friends and I have made quite a game of it, guessing which recent films Jesus is specifically unhappy with: *Gigli*? *Wild Hogs*? *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*? *Saw VI*?



ERIC SAMUELSEN is a professor of drama and film theory at Brigham Young University and a three-time recipient of the Association for Mormon Letters award for drama. His play *The Plan* was published in SUNSTONE issue 155.

It's easy to dismiss the painting as an artifact of the lunatic fringe, easy to find it comical and foolish. Like this: Even if Jesus really doesn't want us to read Darwin, or see Hollywood movies, what does that have to do with the Constitution? And anyway, are we meant to seriously regard the Constitution as inspired in a scriptural sense? Did he literally hand it down, as Moses was handed the tablets? Is there seriously a school arguing for the Constitution as scripturally inerrant? I don't even believe in *scripture* as scripturally inerrant. Are we heading towards Sunday School classes discussing the theological implications of, say, the three-fifths rule?

AS I WRITE this, it's February 2010. Barack Obama is president; Harry Reid is Senate majority leader. The Senate has passed a health care reform bill; the House passed a similar bill earlier, but despite overwhelming majorities in both chambers, no reconciled bill seems to be forthcoming. Both bills are moderate and reasonable, compromise measures, flawed but not without merit. But for many of my LDS brothers and sisters, “Obamacare” is a catastrophe, the apocalypse, the end of everything good. I've felt for years that the best guide to the Mormon zeitgeist is the letters-to-the-editor page of the *Deseret News*. If that's true, then Utah Mormons are collectively losing their cool. President Obama is routinely described as a socialist, a fascist, a Maoist, and a Communist; his administration as something dark and seductively satanic. Our nation is descending into chaos and anarchy; we're in the Last Days; we're just about beyond redemption.

In short, a large number of Utahns have been watching Glenn Beck and taking him very seriously indeed. And the movement he leads and inspires seems to be growing. Call them tea partiers or 9/12ers or Palinistas, there's a widespread anxiety on the Right that's finding a voice. And the ideas aren't just those of Beck. In addition to satanic Supreme Court decisions, Darwin, and the Constitution, one other publication is prominently featured in the McNaughton painting. On Jesus's right hand, in the Good People group, an African-American college student holds a

copy of Cleon Skousen's *The Five Thousand Year Leap*.

Published in 1981 and long out of print, Skousen's book has resurfaced recently thanks to Glenn Beck. Beck has touted it as the book that "changed his life." He wrote a preface to a new edition, published with permission of the Skousen family. It has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. And the ideas that animate Beck's program come directly from Skousen. There's a connection between Skousen and Beck, the John Birch Society, Evan Mecham, and President Ezra Taft Benson. And one of the things they all have in common is a certain definition of America. Exceptionalist America, defined not as a landmass or a political idea but as a fundamentally religious construct, eschatological, millennial, apocalyptic, and ecstatic. By describing the past, these people intend to found a movement that will define a future built on manifest destiny, overt religiosity, moralism and aggressively laissez faire capitalism.

Reading *The Five Thousand Year Leap* and Beck's own book, *Arguing with Idiots: How to Stop Small Minds and Big Government*, it's easy to see how something as ham-handed as the McNaughton painting could become popular in Mormon culture. In the Book of Mormon, the North American continent is described as particularly blessed. In the Doctrine & Covenants, the Lord tells Joseph Smith of "the laws and constitution of the people, which I have suffered to be established . . . and for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood (D&C 101:77–80). And so we talk of our "divinely inspired Constitution"; and it's not a far leap to embracing paintings in which Jesus cradles the Constitution as a sort of holy relic.

But anyone who's seriously studied American history knows that whatever happened in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, it wasn't a revelation. Fifty-five very bright,

well-read, mostly wealthy white men, many of them slave owners, met together and argued and disputed and compromised and eventually created a document none of them were really all that wild about. They weren't for the most part, religiously inclined, and they certainly didn't begin their deliberations with prayer, as is widely believed in Mormon culture. Quite the contrary: Madison's journal describes how, at one particularly contentious point in their deliberations, Benjamin Franklin suggested they pause for prayer. But the necessity of bringing in a pastor to say one killed the idea. In Madison's words, seeing a pastor enter the hall might "lead the public to believe that the embarrassments and dissensions within the Convention had suggested this measure." And so no prayer was offered. Certainly the idea that one of the delegates might say the prayer never occurred to any of those debating. Gentlemen did not pray.

They created a political document, and it's served us well. And we should read it, study it, think about it. Skousen's book presents itself as a kind of Constitutional primer, describing twenty-eight fundamental Constitutional principles which we Americans have apparently forgotten. It's meant to be a book of legal and histor-



WHILE READING BECK'S BOOK, I HAD AN EPIPHANY, A TERRIFICALLY SHOCKING ONE: I AGREED WITH GLENN BECK ABOUT SOMETHING! AND NOT JUST SOMETHING TRIVIAL, SOMETHING UTTERLY FUNDAMENTAL.

ical analysis. But what are we to make of a book which, while discussing the history and content of the Constitution, makes no mention of the Civil War, mentions slavery only once in passing, and passes off the entire civil rights movement as a Communist conspiracy?

The Skousen narrative: In the two or three years before the Revolution, “a spirit of ‘sacrifice and reform’ became manifest in all thirteen colonies.”¹ “Many Americans became so impressed with their improvement in the quality of life as a result of the reform movement that they were afraid that they might lose it if they did not hurriedly separate from the corrupting influence of British manners.”² The British, with their “elegance, luxury and effeminacy”³ threatened the American way of simple virtue. So Americans rose up in revolt and established a nation that was not only uniquely virtuous but also uniquely open to market principles in economics. As a result, we took a “five thousand year leap,” in which we managed to cram five thousand years’ worth of human progress into a little more than two hundred years.

Virtuous Yankee farmers versus effeminate mincing British dandies: it’s a neatly metaphoric narrative and a serviceable one. It forms the plot of the first American-written stage comedy: Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787), in which the stout-hearted American backwoodsman, Colonel Manley, outwits the British swell Billy Dimple. Eighteenth-century British propagandists were just as fond of this narrative during the Napoleonic wars, portraying sturdy British tars fighting frog-and-snail-eating French fops. It’s king-men vs. freemen. And conservatives still love it: see for example, Charles Krauthammer’s op-ed piece in which that snooty elitist Barack Obama is portrayed as disdaining “ankle-dwelling peasants.”⁴ But Skousen presents no evidence for any of his “history,” probably because no evidence of pre-Revolutionary moral improvement exists. And it’s difficult to see what any of this pre-Revolutionary cultural war nonsense has to do with the Constitution.

There’s another narrative at play, here, though: a narrative of paradise lost, of purity defiled. The Founders were uniquely virtuous, uniquely inspired. Just as the primitive church represented perfect Christianity, which then—degraded by sophisticates and sophists (those odious Gnostics)—fell into apostasy, so has once-pristine America fallen into an apostasy, driven there by secular humanists. One turning point was the passage of the 17th Amendment instituting direct election of Senators by the voters, for those who don’t know their Constitutional amendments by heart. Another was the New Deal; another, the Great Society. And then there’s Obama who was elected on a platform of “change.” I think that’s why so much of Beck’s rhetoric constructs Obama as Other—a socialist, a Maoist, a smooth-talkin’ charmer. I expect that Obama’s race is also a factor, and his suspiciously Muslim-sounding name. Obama’s different. And “different” suggests corruption, yet another variant on our national loss of innocence. Innovation equals apostasy.





It's strange to me that this particular meme would find a foothold in Mormonism. Our story is less about apostasy than restoration. We don't see early nineteenth-century America as a paradise—we're more inclined to view early nineteenth-century Americans as the guys who were trying to kill us. Joseph Smith was a fervent Jacksonian—Andy Jackson, who saw the Founders as Pharisees; the hot-tempered firebrand who kicked the money-changers out of the temple. Later, though, Joseph came to recognize the limitations of Jacksonism—the states'-rights, limited-government conservatism that, to Joseph, was holding back progress. Joseph wanted an activist government, funding the building of levees on the Mississippi, even paying slave-owners to end slavery (what a colossal expansion of the powers of the federal government *that* would have entailed!). Specifically, Joseph wanted the federal government to force Missouri to give us our money back. Honestly, why aren't we all progressives?

It's possible, for example, to believe that the Constitution is an inspired document, while also recognizing its limitations, flaws, and political compromises. Elder Dallin Oaks, in a 1992 *Ensign* article, said "one should not expect perfection in a document that must represent a consensus." He went on to say "reverence for the United States Constitution is so great that sometimes individuals speak as if its every word and phrase had the same standing as scripture. Personally, I have never considered it necessary to defend every line of the Constitution as scriptural. For example, I find nothing scriptural in the compromise on slavery or the minimum age or years of citizenship for congressmen, senators, or the president." And Joseph Smith faulted the Constitution for the national government's lack of power to intervene when the state of Missouri used its militia to expel the Latter-day Saints from their lands. Given Skousen's attachment to states' rights, it's worth pointing out that Joseph Smith blamed the Constitution for giving insufficient power to the federal government. Mormons know President Martin Van Buren for his famous line to Joseph Smith: "Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you . . . If I take up for you I shall lose the vote of Missouri." The way we usually parse that is as the most venal of political calculations: he was on our side, but chose not to act out of partisan considerations. According to Skousen's reading of the 10th Amendment, Van Buren would have been justified if he'd said, "Your cause may be just, gentlemen, but this is a state matter. The federal government is powerless to intervene."

Skousen's method is to announce some principle, offer some context-less quotations to support it, and draw some predictably partisan conservative conclusions. For example, he says that the Founders believed that natural law should form the basis for sound government. That was certainly true for Madison and many other Founders. Skousen then creates a list of examples of how natural law might influence policy. A casual reader might assume that all the examples reflect the Founding Fathers' understanding of natural law. But the examples are without attribution, and many reflect



WE ARE BOTH COLUMBIA AND AMERICA, BOTH THE SHINING CITY ON A HILL, AND ENRON AND WALL STREET AND USED CAR LOTS.

only Skousen's political views. For example, when Skousen asserts that "the concept of Separation of Powers is based on Natural Law," it's at least an arguable position. But "Laws protecting the Family and the Institution of Marriage are based on Natural Law" asserts a right not found in the Constitution, and though the 2nd Amendment's right to bear arms is Constitutional, it's very unclear what the Framers meant by it, and it's certainly not founded on any laws they would have recognized. Reading Skousen and Beck, I'm reminded of a favorite headline from the satiric online magazine, *The Onion*: "Area Man Passionate Defender of What He Imagines Constitution to Be."

And of course, Skousen applauds the Founders for their religiosity and what he calls their "public morality." I'm not sure what he means by public morality—the main example he gives is George Washington's refusal to collect a salary for his service as general or as president. But surely Skousen knows that most of his heroes—Washington, Jefferson, Madison—were slave owners. Doesn't that have moral implications? If he means that slavery was a private matter, not involving "public morality," it's difficult to

imagine an institution more public than slavery. And Jefferson did invite Sally Hemings to live in Europe with him. As for their religious views, Skousen gathers a number of quotations from a variety of Founders where they thank Divine Providence for this or that. But the Founders were public men, and *pro forma* declarations of conventional piety were as much a part of their political lives as they are for politicians today. In short, Skousen's project is not to read historical documents in an effort to discover what the Founders really thought or believed; he's looking for material to support an *a priori* stance.

THE WORD THAT often attaches to both Skousen and Beck is "crazy." Beck, in fact, tends to take it and run with it on his show: "People will say I'm crazy. Well, how crazy is it that . . ." Skousen, and now Beck, love to cite U.S. history and love to present themselves as lovers of American history. Well, what's history? I define it

as a narrative of events from the past consistent with extant documentation. Presumably the histories taught in schools are tainted by current academia's America-hating, socialist agenda. Is the only alternative, then, to make up a history entirely from your own imagination? Skousen found evidences of Communism behind every bush; his views were so extreme that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI found it necessary to maintain a file on Skousen for years that eventually totaled some 2,000 pages. If you're too weirdly conservative for J. Edgar Hoover, that says something. Even in *The Five Thousand Year Leap*, a book which was meant to sanitize his views for broader public consumption, Skousen nods approvingly to ancient criminal codes that would provide the death penalty to homosexuals. As for Beck, I don't watch his show much, but I can say that I've never watched it without seeing something bizarre: pouring "gasoline" (actually water) on a guest, describing President Obama as racist, comparing him to Chairman Mao, and discussing strange symbols encoded in the retired lobby art of the Rockefeller Center. He's convinced that an innocuous organization of community organizers, ACORN, is trying to

kill him. He's talked at some length about a fantasy in which he'd kill filmmaker Michael Moore. Just watch him sometime; all the crying, all the histrionics.

Here's where things get embarrassing, though. Both Skousen and Beck insist that America stands primarily for two things: religious virtue and free market economics. I have recently written a play, *Amerigo*, that also tries to define America. And while reading Beck's book, I had an epiphany, a terrifically shocking one: I agreed with Glenn Beck about something! And not just something trivial, something utterly fundamental. Because in my play, I also describe America as a place defined by twin impulses: Christian, and also commercial.

In *Amerigo*, I take up the discovery of America as key to the definition of America. And so I examine the competing claims of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci. And in their claims, I also see an America uniquely religious and also uniquely capitalist. In Mormon culture, we have a stake in Columbus: 1 Nephi 13:12 describes a man who "was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it . . . wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren." We think that refers to Columbus, not Leifr Eiriksson. Columbus was a religious man, albeit with religious views that were thought strange even by the peculiar standards of fifteenth-century Catholicism. But he also liked a lot of the same scriptures we Mormons like: "other sheep I have who are not of this fold," for example. If Columbus was nuts, he was *our* kind of nuts. Most Americans don't know much about Amerigo Vespucci, but he was a successful businessman in some peculiarly modern ways in addition to being an explorer. The New World came to be named America after him, for example, because the German publisher Martin Waldseemuller published a popular map calling the New World that in 1507. I think it's a cross-promotion—Waldseemuller had published Vespucci's book about his journeys a few months before. But I see Vespucci not as a businessman/hero ushering in an American Great Leap Forward, but as a con man, a pimp, a hustler.

I add a third character, the most important character of the play: the eighteenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Sor Juana was a playwright, novelist, poet, and scholar, a Christian humanist, and a woman deeply engaged with what was left of Native American culture. In her mind, the "discovery" of America meant an unprecedented human catastrophe, the wholesale destruction of peoples and cultures. In other words, the meaning of America is neither historic triumphalism nor a fundamentalist future, but tragedy. And I tie it all together with a fourth character, the most pragmatic political thinker of the Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli, because I think a certain amoral attachment to realpolitik is also part of what defines America. And that too has led to tragedy: to Vietnam and Iraq and the United Fruit-driven massacre Colombians call *Matanza de las bananeras*. (I love comedian Dave Barry's description

of the Monroe Doctrine: 1. No European country can intervene in the internal affairs of any other country in the Western Hemisphere. 2. But we can. 3. Neener neener neener.) My play is a comedy, and I'm fond of comedy, but we must ruefully admit that the narrative of America is something much closer to tragedy.

Isn't that written into our own historical narrative as well? The story of the Book of Mormon is fundamentally tragic, is it not? Isn't our most unique scripture's narrative one of war and destruction and genocide? And can't we even read that sense of tragedy into D&C 101? "I redeemed the land by the shedding of blood?"

SO WHAT DOES America mean, aside from paradox and contradiction? In America, "all men are created equal," and in America, the man who wrote those words owned slaves. We believe white men were led to America by the hand of God, and we know that their arrival set off the deadliest pandemic in the history of the world. Our greatest president spent his four years in office waging a horrific civil war. We are both Columbia and America, both the shining city on a hill, and Enron and Wall Street and used car lots.

Here's my counter-narrative, then. And it goes back a ways. It is, in any case, what I believe about America.

God exists, and His ways are inscrutable. He put us here, on this testing ground we call earth, knowing we would be subjected to violence and disease and horror. And also beauty and love and kindness. The history of mankind is a tragic and violent one. God has had to work through very imperfect vessels. But all civilizations tend to agree on certain moral principles: that murder is wrong, that families matter, that freedom is preferred above slavery. Above all, the human capacity for reason has provided some hope, some truth, some insight. And we can learn from all human history, provided we study it honestly and with some effort at scholarly objectivity.

The Enlightenment, and its thinkers and writers, influenced the ideas of such hard-headed secular humanists as Madison, Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin. The light of Christ, which is also the light of intelligence, influenced their ideas, and the great documents they created—the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence—inspired a new democratic reform, based on the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau, yes, but also with precedents in the Icelandic bing and ancient Greek democracy and the Great Binding Law of the people gathered in the Iroquois Confederation. And America's Founding Fathers were flawed, as all humans are flawed. Many owned slaves and defended the practice of chattel slavery, though most knew it was deeply immoral. America was built on religion, yes, but also on genocide, on the murder of Native Americans, and the enslavement of Africans. Like all nations, America was built on a foundation of violence, and that legacy remains part of our heritage.

But gradually, through intelligent application of reason to social problems, through trial and error, through sen-

sible government intervention, we've solved at least some of our nation's problems. Business regulation ameliorates the worst anti-social excesses of open capitalism. We've made progress in combating racism, in allowing women the same freedoms men have traditionally enjoyed, in allowing people trapped in desperately unhappy marriages a way to form new lives and new attachments. The elderly can live out their golden years with some measure of financial security, and help is available for the poor and sickly. The 1950s saw the last culturally accepted expressions of openly held racism and sexism and the abuse of women and children. Quite frightening attitudes and ideas that were broadly held fifty years ago are no longer openly part of our national cultural conversation. The Sixties were a time in which the human need for freedom found expression in music, art, movies, television. Even our understanding of human sexuality improved and has blessed the world.

Today, Americans live in a dangerous world, but one immeasurably better, in almost every sense, than ever before in world history. We live in a less violent world than any of our ancestors, and in a world where almost all children grow to maturity in health and safety. We live in a world where science has made it possible for us to know more about more of our brothers and sisters across the globe than ever before. Information technology, transportation technology, entertainment technology, and above all, the glorious revolution of medical technology have changed almost all aspects of life for the better for more people than ever before. The free exchange of goods and services in a market economy can do extraordinary good.

But not always—markets are famously amoral as the great institution of the Family is under attack economically, as we see the working poor crushed by the inhuman violence inherent in laissez faire economics. The lives of women have improved immeasurably over the last hundred years or so, in large measure because of the steadfast courage of the valiant pioneers of feminism. Nonetheless, the commodification and exploitation of women, the soul-destroying falseness of pornography, threatens to undo much of the progress that's been made. The rich get richer, and the poor have to work ever harder to keep up, often without social safety nets, and the effect on families and children can be devastating. The progress we take for granted in America isn't as widely shared as it should be. Too many of our brothers and sisters live lives of desperation, pain, and fear.

We see before us a great task: to create a millennial peace ourselves, as Christ's spirit urges us to see all people as brothers and sisters. As Mormons, we believe in prophets, and although the Brethren are also flawed and sinful human beings, at times the Spirit speaks through them. We would do well to listen and employ their ideas thoughtfully, the way we'd use any evidence, any ideas, as we work through problems, trying to think our own way through to answers and solutions. Perhaps the world will end nonetheless in apocalyptic violence. Meanwhile, we have work to do.

America, in a word, means the possibility of Zion. Mormonism places Zion on many maps, from Jackson County, Missouri, to Utah, to Jerusalem, to all of North America, to the meaning *du jour*, which would be a watered-down "everywhere there are some Mormons." But the most significant meaning comes again from Joseph Smith. I'm paraphrasing D&C 105 here: Zion comes about when we are so unified as a people that there are no poor among us.

This is the point I believe Skousen and Beck miss. The greatness of America is inextricably linked to the goodness of America—on that point, we agree. But the goodness of America is defined by our commitment to ending poverty and caring for the poor, our commitment to tolerance, diversity, and social justice. Those are the principles and values that define the Constitution, and they are the principles neither Beck nor Skousen seem ever to have noticed.

But their story, the story of America Virtuous and Triumphant is compelling, and carries a presumption of patriotism that our other, truer but grimier story does not necessarily enjoy. I don't know how to combat Beck-ism. I've written a play; I'm a little worried that no one will see it who doesn't agree with it. So come. Bring a friend; preferably an unlikely friend, someone from your ward, perhaps, someone more conservative than you. Start a conversation. That's what good plays, and good history, should do.

NOTES

1. Cleon Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap: Twenty-eight Great Ideas that Changed the World* (Franklin, Tennessee: American Documents, 2009), 52.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 53.
4. Charles Krauthammer, "Obama Doesn't Speak to Ankle-dwelling Peasants," *Deseret News*, 7 February 2010, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700007442/Obama-doesnt-speak-to-ankle-dwelling-peasants.html> (accessed 6 March 2010).

Plan-B Theatre Company Presents
the World Premiere of
Eric Samuels' *Amerigo*
April 8–18, 2010

Featuring Kirt Bateman (*Niccolo Machiavelli*), Matthew Ivan Bennett (*Amerigo Vespucci*), Mark Fossen (*Christopher Columbus*) and Deena Marie Manzanares (*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*). Directed by Jerry Rapier.

Studio Theatre, Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center
Downtown Salt Lake City
Tickets: \$20
To purchase: 801-355-ARTS or planbtheatre.org/amerigo