The Mormon In Mitt
On the eve of America’s bicentennial in 1976, a leading authority of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rose to speak at the Mormons’ biannual General Conference in Salt Lake City. “Can we maintain our basic freedoms, peace and prosperity for another 200 years?” he asked, rhetorically, before continuing, “The answer to this question is yes, if we shall individually repent and conform to the laws of the God of this land, who is Jesus Christ.”

The sermon that followed was titled “America’s Destiny.” Its preacher was Marion G. Romney, a member of the Mormon elite and cousin of former Michigan governor George Romney and of Mitt Romney. The Salt Lake address and a follow-up speech the next spring at Brigham Young University neatly captured the Mormon vision of America’s special role in sacred and secular history—a vision that greatly expands the traditional Protestant view of America as a new promised land.

According to Mormon founder Joseph Smith, the U.S. is the terrestrial home of the Garden of Eden and the place where a resurrected Jesus appeared to restore the gospel and where he will come again—in Jackson County, Missouri. “What is largely metaphorical for many Protestants is literal for many Mormons,” says Matthew Bowman, a historian of Mormonism at Hampden-Sydney College. At BYU, Marion Romney spoke of America’s “final, great and glorious destiny. Here Zion is to be established and the New Jerusalem is to be built. From here the law of God shall go forth to all nations.”

It’s tempting to think of Mitt Romney’s faith as that of John Winthrop on steroids—that the Republican presidential nominee’s religious tradition exalts America above all other nations, creating an exceptionalism that could invest American policy with a sense of divine sanction or lead to theocracy. Even the title of Romney’s 2010 book—No Apology: The Case for American Greatness—doesn’t allow for much nuance. Yet the political implications of the Mormon understanding of American destiny are not so simple. The story of the faith of Romney’s ancestors on the American continent is one of exile and redemption, of blessing and punishment and, perhaps above all, of struggle and endurance amid trial and tribulation.

Which, when you think about it, is a pretty fair description of a close-fought presidential campaign. At the moment, for his supporters and opponents, Romney remains more a political caricature than a character from real life. There is Romney the Plutocrat, the man who can seemingly dismiss 47% of the country because they are “dependent upon government.” There is Romney the Turnaround Artist, the man who should be trusted with the fortunes of a troubled nation. There is Romney the Secretive, the man who keeps his tax returns close to hand. And last week, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic majority leader, who is also a Mormon, added a new one to the mix: Romney the Unrepresentative Mormon. Reid told reporters that Romney has “sullied” his faith and “is not the face of Mormonism.”

Like most other presidential candidates, Romney speaks of such matters in general, not in particular. “I will be true to my beliefs,” he declared in his most expansive discussion of his faith and politics, a 2007 speech delivered at George H.W. Bush’s presidential library. “Some believe that such a confession of my faith will sink my candidacy. If they are right, so be it. But I think they underestimate the American people. Americans do not respect believers of convenience. Americans tire of those who would jettison their beliefs, even to gain the world.”

Yet in the search for the real Romney in these last weeks of the race for the White House, there’s much to be said for beginning at the beginning, with what Romney has called “the faith of my fathers.” In his address at the Bush library, Romney said, “I was taught in my home to honor God and love my neighbor ... I saw my parents provide compassionate care to others, in personal ways to people nearby and in just as consequential ways in leading national volunteer movements ... My faith is grounded on these truths. You can witness them in Ann and my marriage and in our family. We are a long way from perfect, and we have surely stumbled along the way, but our aspirations, our values, are the same as those from the other faiths that stand upon this common foundation. And these convictions will indeed inform my presidency.”

Observers have long sought clues to Romney’s character and worldview in his Mormonism. There is the optimistic salesmanship, the blindingly pure family values, the can-do spirit. In many ways Romney is Reagan with children who speak to him, a cheerful leader who has a mystical appreciation of the role America is meant to play in history.

What is less appreciated is the Mormons’ historical sense of siege and of tragedy. By cultural and theological conditioning, Romney expects life to be difficult, even confounding—hence the need for the analytical skills of a management consultant. Mormons are accustomed to conflict and expect persecution. The Mormon sense of destiny gives followers a part in a divine story, a larger saga of the conflict between good and evil, infusing their lives with both great purpose and keen
pragmatism. Viewing Romney through the lens of the Mormon understanding of history helps explain his ambition, his devotion to personal liberty and his comfort with expediency.

**Joseph Smith’s Journey**

The story of Mormonism—the quintessential American religion—begins with Joseph Smith Jr., who experienced visions in the first third of the 19th century to restore what Smith said was a fallen and corrupted church. Through his own prophecies and the Book of Mormon, Smith founded a faith that emphasized America, and Mormon leaders have long held that American greatness was contingent on the moral choices of its people—choices that were to be made by free will, or what is known as moral agency. In the Mormon cosmology, life in this fallen world is a constant struggle between good and evil.

In December 1833, Smith and his followers were in a bad spot. They had moved to Missouri to build their Zion, the place they believed would ultimately serve as what a 20th-century Mormon leader, Ezra Taft Benson, would call the Lord’s “base of operations.”

Under pressure from locals who were unhappy to have members of the new sect in their midst voting as a bloc and practicing economic communalism, the Mormons soon heard a prophecy from Smith that exalted religious liberty—a liberty the Mormons desperately needed America to protect and nurture. Smith said God had told him the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired and that the Founding Fathers were “wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose.”

Eventually driven from Missouri, Smith and his flock attempted to settle permanently in Nauvoo, Ill. Yet a backlash against Smith led to the arrest of the prophet, who was ultimately shot to death by an anti-Mormon mob.

Moving westward, the church grew more pragmatic over time, seeking to make peace with the broader world to preserve freedom for Mormons to live as they wished. Even polygamy, the most notorious of Mormon practices, was linked to practical concerns: the church needed new members. As Romney told 60 Minutes in 2007, referring to his great-grandfather Miles Romney, “They were
trying to build a generation out there in the desert, and so he took additional wives as he was told to do."

According to biographers Michael Kranish and Scott Helman in their book The Real Romney, in 1862, after signing federal legislation outlawing polygamy, Abraham Lincoln, consumed with concerns about the Union, told a messenger to "go back and tell Brigham Young that if he will let me alone I will let him alone." Lincoln's "true priority," wrote Kranish and Helman, "was to ensure that Mormons stayed out of the conflict." Which they did. They had their own concerns and did not need to invite a war with the Union.

By the last years of the 19th century, the church had officially abandoned polygamy—not least in order to win statehood for Utah. Theology conformed to political reality; a tenet of the faith gave way to the needs of the moment. The decision on polygamy, announced in 1890, had a particular effect on the Romney family. Mitt's great-grandfather went to northern Mexico and created a Mormon outpost at a time when the faith of the church included plural marriage. A crisis shook the clan when it was driven out of Mexico by revolutionaries. As a boy, George Romney, Mitt's father, was part of this latest Mormon exodus. Circumstances changed, and one had to cope.

**Politics and Pragmatism**

*It is possible that Mitt Romney's tendency to conform to the world immediately around him is at least partly rooted in the history of his family and of his church. In Massachusetts he was a moderate; when seeking the nomination of a more conservative national party, he moved right, often not even trying to explain why he might have held such different opinions in such a relatively short span of time.*

Romney's commitments to liberty and individualism as organizing American principles also have Mormon origins. "People from all over the world who prized freedom—the innovators, the pioneers, the dreamers—came to America," Romney wrote in No Apology. "And so they continue today... It is this love of liberty and the accompanying spirit of invention, creativity, daring-do, and pioneering that have propelled America to become the most powerful nation in the history of the world."
Though usually right of center, the Mormon church has staked out different political positions at different times. Utah went for William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and for Franklin D. Roosevelt in all four of his presidential victories. On the conservative side, in the 1950s Ezra Taft Benson served as President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Agriculture, ultimately becoming a supporter of the far-right-wing John Birch Society and exploring the possibilities of running on presidential tickets with Strom Thurmond and George Wallace. (Church president David McKay held Benson back.) Among a handful of Mormons, there’s also a much disputed report of what is known as “the White Horse Prophecy.” Joseph Smith is alleged to have said that an hour would come when the U.S. Constitution would “hang by a thread” and the Mormon people would ride forth to rescue the nation. The prophecy is far from official church doctrine, but it is even now a favorite among radically conservative Mormons. And at the time of Marion Romney’s Salt Lake City sermon, Protestant evangelicals, in part in reaction to the Supreme Court’s January 1973 ruling in Roe v. Wade, were beginning to organize politically, and Mormons became active in the antiabortion cause.

The story of the church, however, does not march in lockstep with the story of modern conservatism. As Bowman points out, Utah Mormons supported Ronald Reagan by a substantial margin in 1980 only to have the church leadership successfully fight against the siting of MX missiles in the state. “When threatened,” said then church president Spencer Kimball, “we become antiennial instead of pro-Kingdom of God. We train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot ... perverting the Savior’s teaching, ‘Love your enemies.’” As the mood of the country grew more optimistic in the 1990s, the Mormon hierarchy urged the faithful to view the world in less hostile terms. Every election year, the church issues a letter reminding members that “principles compatible with the Gospel can be found in the platforms of various political parties.”

A Question of Charity
The voice on the video is steady, the message seemingly stark. “There are 47% of the people who will vote for the President no matter what,” Romney said at a private fundraiser in Boca Raton, Fla., in a May recording reported in September by Mother Jones magazine. “All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.” He added, “I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”

Romney has also clearly articulated the opposite view. “If we’re going to help lift our brothers and sisters out of poverty, we must restore our economy and reduce the debt,” he told faith leaders in September, in a contrast reported by Christianity Today. “When our economy is healthy and growing, we have the resources to take care of those who still find themselves in need.” Moreover, Romney said, “Our government rightfully provides a safety net for the hungry, the homeless, the sick and the elderly, and we have the responsibility to keep it intact for future generations.”

Romney’s personal engagement in charitable works is formidable. The Mormon church requires its members to tithe 10% of their income to maintain good standing in the church. He and his wife are generous donors: in 2010, the Romneys gave $3 million to charity, $1.5 million of which went directly to the church. The church runs more than 300 employment-resource centers and 80 family-services offices. Some 9,800 missionaries work in welfare services, teaching English as a second language, improving agricultural and medical practices and distributing clothing. The LDS church encourages members to keep a
the rise of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, Romney heard warnings about an overly paternalistic government. "Under the Great Society, a gap is growing between government and people," his mother Lenore said in a fundraising speech in 1967. "Government is becoming 'they,' not 'we,' 'theirs,' not 'ours.' Instead of encouraging us to be our brother's keeper, it tells us to relax because we've hired a keeper for our brother. It tells us that government will not only keep our brother, but government will be our keeper too ... Americans are not by nature a 'kept' people."

Mitt would agree with his mother but would not rule out a role for government, if a more limited one than Democrats favor. "My faith is grounded in the conviction that a consequence of our common humanity is our responsibility to one another—to our fellow Americans foremost, but also to every child of God," Romney told Cathedral Age. Still, he has a Mormon's dislike of the idea of a dole. Within the church, those receiving help have to give something back too; dependence is to be avoided, though generosity is essential. It is, if you will, a pragmatic way of looking at the matter.

With only weeks to go before the election, the question is whether Romney has the capacity to draw once more on the pragmatic tradition of his religious forebears. Will he stick with a strategy that seems not to be working against President Obama, or will he respond to changing events—in this case, falling poll numbers in key swing states—with bold policy proposals or a more overtly negative campaign or whatever might move the election in his favor?

One thing is clear: as a devout Mormon leader, Romney knows his church history, and he knows that difficulty and doubt are inherent elements of life. The key thing is to remain faithful, to serve, to press ahead—to the next territory that might welcome you, to the next voter who might decide to give you a chance. From the outside, Romney's life looks to have been easy and affluent. There is, however, another angle of vision, one that reveals a deep-seated Romney instinct to survive and thrive in even the worst of storms. Whether that part of him can carry the day will determine his destiny—and ours.

—WITHE REPORTING BY ELIZABETH DIAS/
WASHINGTON

A Bustling D.C. Parish

Mormon bishop Robert Nelson of Chevy Chase, Md., isn't exactly sure how to handle the casserole question. You see, his church is run by volunteers, and every member has a calling: teaching Sunday school, managing church finances, organizing food drives, visiting the sick. So when I asked Nelson who would bring the requisite casserole to Ann Romney if she were to get the flu in the White House, he paused and chuckled. "I can imagine wanting to bring the casserole, but then you have to go through security, and at some point you go, The casserole just isn't worth it. Call for carryout."

Mormons attend church on the basis of their addresses, and 1600 Pennsylvania avenue is assigned to Nelson's parish: or ward, on Washington's northern border. New faces are common in that congregation. The church averages 25 new converts a year, making it the highest-baptizing ward in the area. Some 250 people attend gatherings every Sunday, and a total of 650 people from nearly two dozen countries are on the membership roll. Services are warm, and people are friendly. When I visited on a recent Sunday, a suited young leader performed a rendition of "I Have Been Changed for Good" from the musical Wicked to honor the service of departing missionaries. Congregants piled hundreds of cans of food in the foyer or a food drive they spearheaded with other downtown churches. And the rotating preaching responsibilities fell to an elderly African-American woman, a retired couple and a young Kenyan woman, who all spoke on the subject "We are our brother's keeper"—which just happens to be a hot topic in the presidential campaign. No matter the outcome of that race, Bishop Nelson's flock is growing: next month, the ward's new chapel (above) will be dedicated on 16th Street—even closer to the White House. —ELIZABETH DIAS