

# Introduction

**M**ITT ROMNEY'S HARD-FOUGHT but failed bid to secure the 2008 Republican presidential nomination focused major media attention on Mormonism and also on American attitudes toward Mormons. Romney, a practicing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or LDS Church) and a former governor of Massachusetts, emerged as the major challenger to the Republican party's eventual nominee, Senator John McCain of Arizona. On the opposite side of the aisle, the two leading Democratic candidates, Senators Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, ran history-making campaigns, as the first woman and the first African American to come within striking distance of achieving a major party presidential nomination. Although Clinton and Obama seemed to transcend their gender and race in the minds of voters, Romney apparently failed to transcend his religion.

Several significant questions arose during the course of Romney's campaign, including: (1) Are Americans prepared to elect a practicing Latter-day Saint to the nation's highest political office, or, in other words, could Americans trust a Mormon in such an important position of power? (2) If Romney were elected President, to what extent would his Mormon faith influence his decisions? And finally, (3) in the wake of Romney's failure to secure the nomination, what role did his Mormonism play in that defeat? Taken together, these issues are often referred to as "the Mormon question." Underlying the Mormon question, the media gave increased attention to the distinctive doctrines that set Mormonism apart from most other forms of Christianity. Also drawing media scrutiny were historic but now discontinued Mormon practices, including banning blacks from the priesthood and sanctioning polygamy.

The 2008 election was not the first time the Mormon question had surfaced in the context of American presidential politics. Mitt Romney was not the first Mormon—or even the first Romney—to run for president. Some forty years earlier, in 1967, Mitt Romney's father, George W. Romney, then-governor of Michigan, launched his own campaign for the presidency. The

parallels between the two Romneys are eerie.<sup>1</sup> Prior to entering politics, both men enjoyed highly successful careers in the business world, netting each a large personal fortune—George Romney as an automobile executive and Mitt Romney as a venture capitalist. In appearance and demeanor Mitt Romney is clearly his father's son.<sup>2</sup> Romney has the same square jaw and large forehead as his late father, made larger when he flashes that bright white smile and his eyes recede under a heavy brow. The younger Romney also has the same central-casting sweep of black hair with a dose of distinguished white at the temple.<sup>3</sup> Even the ages of the candidates were identical—both Romneys were sixty years old when they launched their respective campaigns, forty years apart. Both Romneys became leading candidates, but both failed to secure their party's nomination.

Besides the two Romneys, eight other individuals with ties to Mormonism have actively sought the American presidency, albeit with the same lack of success. The first of these was none other than Joseph Smith Jr., Mormonism's founder. Smith waged a vigorous campaign in 1844 as an independent candidate, running on a highly detailed third-party platform that addressed the political issues of the day. The Mormon leader's campaign was carefully organized and attracted much national attention. Tragically, Smith's candidacy was cut short when he was assassinated by an angry mob on June 27, 1844.

In the years between George and Mitt Romney's candidacies, two other prominent Mormon politicians made bids for nomination to a major party ticket: Morris "Mo" Udall, a US Representative from Arizona; and Orrin Hatch, a US Senator from Utah. Udall sought the 1976 Democratic nomination, running a strong challenge to former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. Carter, after winning a protracted nomination fight, went on to defeat incumbent President Gerald Ford in the general election. Orrin Hatch's bid for the 2000 Republican nomination was less successful. In the wake of his last-place finish in the early caucus state of Iowa, Hatch dropped out of the race and cleared the way for the eventual nominee, Governor George W. Bush of Texas, who went on to win the general election.

The presidential efforts of five other Mormons connected with independent or third parties have received much less attention. Of these, the most noteworthy was the latent candidacy of Mormon Apostle Ezra Taft Benson,

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1. Alex Beam, "Who was George Romney?" *Boston Globe*, December 9, 2004.

2. Sridhar Pappu, *The Holy Cow!* Candidate," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2005, 112.

3. Hugh Hewitt, *A Mormon in the White House? 10 Things Every American Should Know About Mitt Romney* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Co., 2007), 39.

who ultimately became president of the LDS Church (1985-94). While serving as Secretary of Agriculture under US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Benson emerged as a national conservative leader. From early 1966 to late 1967, a third-party effort on Benson's behalf was spearheaded by an organization known as "The 1976 Committee." This group promoted an independent ticket with Benson for president and South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond for vice president. Their efforts were abandoned in apparent deference to former Alabama Governor George Wallace's self-styled third-party bid.

Parley P. Christensen waged an even earlier third-party effort in 1920 as the presidential nominee of the left-wing Farmer-Labor Party. Although not a baptized Latter-day Saint, Christensen had grown up in Utah in a Mormon family. Eldridge Cleaver, likewise, was not a Mormon at the time of his third-party candidacy on the 1968 Peace and Freedom Party ticket. Cleaver's connection to Mormonism came years later in 1983, when he converted and joined the LDS Church. Cleaver's remarkable political and religious odyssey took him from militant Black Panther Party leader in the 1960s to conservative Mormon Republican in the 1980s.

Mormon feminist leader Sonia Johnson gained national notoriety as the vocal leader of "Mormons for the Equal Rights Amendment," resulting ultimately in her excommunication from the LDS Church in 1979. Continuing her political activism, Johnson received the left-wing Citizens Party's presidential nomination in 1984. Also running as a third-party candidate, albeit on the opposite end of the political spectrum, was James Gordon "Bo" Gritz, who received the right-wing Populist Party nomination in 1992. Gritz, a highly decorated Vietnam War veteran, had converted to Mormonism in the mid-1980s.

Taken together, these ten individuals—whose political beliefs span the ideological spectrum from ultraconservative to ultra-liberal—underscore the complex, multi-faceted nature of Mormonism itself, as it has evolved from a small American church into a world religion. This book will explore the campaigns of these ten candidates, with an eye to how Mormonism informed and affected their unsuccessful presidential bids: Why did they run? Why did they lose? Was America ready for a Mormon president in the past? Is it ready now? And will Americans in the future be willing to elect a Mormon to the nation's highest political office?