

STATINTL

The Mormon Empire

by Frances Lang

STEWART BURTON IS AN ACCOMPLISHED and trusted employee of the Central Intelligence Agency. As Chief of Station at Georgetown, British Guiana, in the mid-'60s, he helped make sure that Cheddi Jagan never got to power; and later, in Rio de Janeiro, he tried to help the Argentinian Secret Police stamp out revolutionary cells. It was thankless work. But Burton, like other of the Agency's most dedicated operatives in Latin America, is sustained by a faith that transcends the tawdry ethics of his profession. He is a Mormon.

It may seem strange for a religious body which began as a persecuted sect driven from one region to another, murdered and reviled, to wind up providing both the CIA and FBI with some of their best men. But for the Mormons there is no contradiction. By habit and training a conservative group, Mormons are tightly entwined with a religion which is stringently hierarchical, profit-oriented, racist, and never likely to embarrass the foreign interests of the U.S., or indeed any capitalist state.

Recent boycotts of sporting events with the Mormons' Brigham Young University by teams from other colleges has brought the Church's peculiar and archaic racial beliefs into public view. What is less known, but more important, is that the Mormons have built up their own extraordinary international society with an intricate maze of economic institutions and political power leading back to the throne of the Church in Salt Lake City, Utah. There, within the tabernacles and temple building, aging Mormon Elders exercise the financial and spiritual wizardry that allows their powerful conglomerate to grow and prosper. With a daily income of better than \$1 million, and extensive political and economic control, especially in the western United States, Mormonism has made the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply into a glamour stock.

With assets of over \$2 billion and a membership of under three million, the Mormon Church is the richest per capita in the world. The Church's interests are extraordinarily widespread. It owns vast real estate (including the most valuable property in Salt Lake City), pineapple and sugar plantations, three mammoth ranches, 650 farms and 40 factories, and the village of Laie in Hawaii. It owns two insurance companies, a trucking company, a sugar beet enterprise, and a substantial interest in Utah's only bank holding company; and it has extensive control over the education and communications systems in large areas of the west and southwest. In addition, Mormons are disproportionately active in state and national politics. In recent years, Mormons have headed the Interior Department, the Federal Communications Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Treasury, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. And the rise.

ONE OF THIS WAS PREFIGURED in the inconspicuous beginnings of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. For years Smith and his small band of converts were driven across the country, ridiculed for their polygamy and other peculiarities, and chased from one town to another by local citizens. Smith led the Mormons from New York to Ohio to Missouri and on to Illinois before being lynched by citizens at Carthage, Illinois, where he was accused of sending a band of thugs to break up a local anti-Mormon newspaper office. From there, the Mormons made their epic trek to the west, finally stopping in the valley of the great salt lake of Utah, where they settled, built a temple and launched their theocratic empire.

According to doctrine, Smith claimed in 1828 to have discovered near his home in upstate New York a set of golden plates engraved in Egyptian by the Israelite prophet Mormon. The plates related the history of Israelite tribes who had migrated to North America about 2000 B.C. and lived there until shortly after Christ's death. At that time, they were killed off by the Indians (who are seen as a quarrelsome faction of the Israelite tribes whose skin was turned dark as punishment for their misdeeds). Before the white Israelites were killed, Christ was resurrected in North America and visited them.

After finding the plates, Joseph Smith was visited by God, Christ, and three prophets who advised him to start his own Church. They said the true Church must have 12 apostles, the same priestly hierarchy as in Christ's day, practice baptism by immersion, and in other ways differ from 19th century religions. So Joseph dictated his own holy writ to a secretary—calling it the Book of Mormon and stipulating that the original flew back to heaven after he retold it—and organized his own Church around its teachings and his own revelations.

What distinguished Mormon doctrine from that of other Protestant churches is the fact that Joseph Smith is its prophet. Smith principally wanted a band of devoted followers to support him in his attempts to set up a religious community and other undertakings, and during his lifetime devotion to the Church meant loyalty to him. Today, absolute fealty is still the cornerstone of the religion, except that now loyalty to the faith of the Latter Day Saints means unquestioning service not of an individual but of a powerful institution.

THE CHURCH IS ORGANIZED in hierarchical fashion, from the office of the First Presidency, down to the multiplicity of parishes (or "wards," as Mormons call them). Each organizational unit is a separate corporation with the power to accumulate a great deal of property on its own and, whatever property an individual