PENNIES FROM HEAVEN
How Mormon Economics Shape the G.O.P.
By Chris Lehmann

AMONG THE BANANA EATERS
The Middle-Class Rebels Behind Libya’s Revolution
By Patrick Graham

STARVE A RAT
A story by Justin Torres
As the American media has copiously noted, the next year or so promises to be a breakout moment in the mainstreaming of the Mormon faith. There are already two Mormon contenders for the G.O.P. presidential nomination: former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney and former Utah governor and diplomat Jon Huntsman. There’s the Tony-winning Broadway comedy The Book of Mormon, which has proved a runaway critical and commercial success. (Serving as recognizable fodder for parody certainly marks a cultural coming-of-age, and for the most part, Mormon leaders have taken the send-up in confident stride.) There are high-profile offerings from Mormon sources that bear no explicit spiritual agenda but abound with Mormon-friendly themes, such as Stephenie Meyer’s hugely successful Twilight franchise of teen vampire novels. And thanks to the heroic promotion of the country’s best-known Mormon convert, Glenn Beck, the work of a previously obscure Mormon polemicist and historian, W. Cleon Skousen, has attained both bestseller status and pride of place in the Tea Party movement.

But for all the attention now lavished on how Mormonism fits in with the American experience, remarkably little is known about a key feature of Mormon belief: the organization of economic life. The omission is puzzling. Romney, after all, has staked his claim to the presidency largely on the basis of his business acumen. Amid a crippling recession, the former CEO of Bain Capital, with an estimated net worth of more than $200 million, presents himself as the assured corporate manager who can briskly lift America out of its long slough of despond. Surely, the conventional wisdom goes, Romney’s fiscal finesse should put him in the White House—and close the gap between Mormons and mainstream evangelicals, who have long regarded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a preserve of dangerous cultists.

In fact, the business side of Mormonism is a curious agent for the faith’s deliverance into the mainstream. It entails an ethos of accumulation that makes the so-called prosperity gospel seem listless by comparison. “Mormonism is the Protestant ethic on steroids,” argues Mark Skousen, a cheerfully libertarian professor of economics who holds the Benjamin Franklin Chair of

Models and photographs by Karen Caldicott

Chris Lehmann is the author of Rich People Things (Haymarket, 2011), the editor of the Yahoo! News blogs and an editor of Bookforum.
Management at Grantham University, and who happens to be Cleon Skousen’s nephew. He describes what he calls an “Old Testament prosperity principle” in the Book of Mormon, “a kind of Abraham covenant: If you live a righteous life, God will bless you. Over and over, you read about this cycle of prosperity—a business cycle, if you will.”

Indeed, Skousen’s faith has been key to shaping his own anti-Keynesian outlook. “One of the reasons I rejected Keynesian economics and Paul Samuelson’s textbook,” he recalls, “is that I immediately felt they were contrary to church doctrine. The whole ‘paradox of thrift’ idea, [which held that] debt is okay—that made no sense to me from a traditional Mormon point of view.”

He is far from alone. Thanks in large part to the remarkable history of the church’s founding, today’s Mormons are model free-market apostles. They have a firm, strident (and historically well-founded) distrust of debt and government; they tend to fetishize precious metals and land assets over the fluid and unreliable fiat currencies that vie for dominance in global exchanges; they maintain a robust system of tithing and church voluntarism and a corresponding disdain for motivation-sapping entitlements and the welfare state; and by long-standing tradition, the heads of all Mormon households must carefully lay in a store of material provisions for the end times or other emergencies.

Perhaps most important, Mormons, unlike adherents of most mainline Protestant denominations, have very little ambivalence about the acquisition of wealth. One scours the endless, incantatory pages of Joseph Smith’s revelation in vain for any suggestion that wealth complicates the spiritual lives of believers. Not for Mormons the queasy business about the camel going through the needle’s eye before a rich man enters the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead, paradise is pretty much set aside for the enterprising rich, whose upward mobility is thought to persist even in the three-tiered scheme of the Mormon afterlife.

These innovations in economic theology have long seemed a bit quaint—akin to the picture-book accounts in LDS scripture of wars and dynasties. But in recent years, and especially with the G.O.P.’s tilt to the right and the rise of the Tea Party, such beliefs no longer appear so fanciful. Indeed, the Mormon infatuation with maximal investor returns and precious metals has shaded steadily into the center of conservative mainstream thought.

Joseph Smith had the poor man’s awe of gold,” writes his biographer Fawn Brodie, “and it crept into his concept of Heaven.” Even by the put-upon standard of upstate New York in the early nineteenth century, Smith’s family was dogged by unique bad fortune. Itinerant farmers who had first gone bust when they tried to export wild ginseng to China, the Smiths were forced to move repeatedly during Joseph’s youth.

By the time they reached the upstate hamlet of Palmyra in 1816, when Smith was eleven, the Second Great Awakening was in full swing. Some frontier revivalists of the day, such as the circuit-riding Methodists of the American South, preached a harsh gospel of individual reward and punishment, which equated a believer’s social station with the condition of his or her soul. More polished evangelical figures, such as the Baptist minister Charles Grandison Finney, spelled out a doctrine of social reform, arguing that the abolition of slavery or the advent of women’s suffrage would pave the way for Christ’s Second Coming.

By Smith’s own account, the intense spiritual ferment of the Second Great Awakening left him bewildered. He wrestled with the question of how all—or many—of the claimants to absolute truth in the Christian tradition could be right. In 1823, however, a revelation led him to the buried gold tablets inscribed, in his account, with a history of the lost tribes of Israel in the New World. He spent much of the next seven years transcribing and translating the plates, often with creditors at his door. And in 1830, with a young wife and with a child on the way, he persuaded one of his early followers to mortgage his farm to pay for the scripture’s publication.

The Book of Mormon neatly resolved distress of both the religious and the mundane variety by emphasizing how perfectly the ideal of prosperity meshed with the divine plan...
Bizarrely, the Mormons sought to incorporate their own bank, the Kirtland Safety Society. When a bill from the Ohio legislature blocked the launch of the bank and its circulating notes, Smith side-stepped these strictures by printing the prefix anti- on the society’s currency—so that he could legally claim to be trading in “anti-banking” notes.

No semantic subterfuge, however, could rescue the flailing bank from the collapse of the local real estate bubble. Meanwhile Smith, who had picked up word in 1836 of a cache of gold buried outside Salem, Massachusetts, organized a secret expedition to rescue the prize. The search proved a bust. This caused Smith to issue a prophecy—one of the rare instances where he professed to speak in the Lord’s name—clearing the whole contretemps from the divine memory bank, while guaranteeing an eventual payoff in Salem for subsequent seekers: “I, the Lord your God, am not displeased with your coming on this journey, notwithstanding your follies. I have much treasure in this city for you, for the benefit of Zion.”

It’s hard not to see, in both the real estate distress of the Kirtland bank and the gold-prospecting adventures of Smith and Co. in 1836, a striking prefiguration of the goldbug investment strategies pitched so relentlessly by Glenn Beck. Nor can it be a coincidence that the tablets on which Smith professed to discover the Book of Mormon were themselves forged from gold. Indeed, after post-1 One can even argue that the Mormon faithful have lately made good on a rumored Smith revelation from the Kirtland bank launch, which foretold that the church-backed currency would prove so strong that it could be readily redeemed in gold and silver specie. In May 2011, Utah governor Gary Herbert signed into law a measure permitting Utah businesses to accept gold and silver in lieu of the greenbacks printed by the Federal Reserve. One of the supporters of the measure, Lowell Nelson of the small-government advocacy group Campaign for Liberty, explained the bill’s appeal to the New York Times by citing the LDS tradition of household preparedness. “It’s kind of written into our theology that we’re supposed to be prepared for any eventualty,” he said.

lygamy, those golden tablets are pretty much all that the popular mind associates with LDS history and theology—supplying reliable ammunition for a long tradition of Mormon-baiting from Mark Twain down to Trey Parker and Matt Stone. But the outlandish details of the faith’s founding moment have overshadowed the more significant legacy of Smith’s prophetic labors: the invention of a New World religion, merging a deeply exceptionalist vision of America’s role in biblical history with a hard-money gospel of individualist success.

Clayton Christensen is a professor at Harvard Business School and the last remaining member of the triumvirate of high-profile economists known informally as Harvard’s “Mormon mafia.” He specializes in the study of “disruptive innovation”—the process by which new technologies upend traditional market structures. And in his view, the Mormon Church represents not only an engine of entrepreneurship but a disruption of the highest order.

“At its core,” he told me, “disruption transforms something that was previously expensive and complicated, and makes it affordable and simple, so that everyone can have it. In many ways, Christianity went off the rails when they decided to hire professional clergy to take care of you and to teach you. It meant that people didn’t actually have access. You had to have [clergy] to mediate between you and God…. The great thing about Mormonism is there’s no sense of high and low, wealthy and poor. We all take care of each other, and we all teach each other. So it really is disruptive.”

To what extent has this disruption been assimilated into the American mainstream? In a sense, the question comes a century and a half late. Mormonism broke through the welter of new sects that arose during the Second Great Awakening by fusing economic and scriptural appeal. Small wonder that this syncretism took root among the dispossessed landowners of upstate New York, who had every reason to regard the
boom-and-bust cycles of frontier existence as a series of quasi-mystical events. And small wonder that the faith spread with impressive speed. Mormonism resonated profoundly with the idea of America that all manner of immigrants would embrace in their most intimate hearts—a resource-rich kingdom to be tamed by hard work.

These folk dimensions of Mormon faith provide a surprisingly durable template for American social mythology in the new millennium, as a cursory glance at any creationist museum or Tea Party gathering will quickly confirm. Now, as then, precious metals are ascribed magical properties, including the power to see anxious investors through every sort of economic calamity. Now, as then, there is the embrace of a supposedly virgin America, half pioneer territory and half primitive church. One can even note that the formulation of an alternate American history (albeit a comparatively plausible one) is now a byword of the Tea Party, which dotes on a tortured and largely confabulated vision of the Founding Fathers, who are made out as hard-money zealots, doctrinaire Christian proselytizers, and values-minded family men—in short, very much like the Mormon faithful.

This mythology, it should be noted, does not stop at the grave, thanks to the Mormon vision of eternity. Following Joseph Smith’s own revelations on the subject, Mormons propose a sequence of evolutionary steps toward divinity known as “eternal progression,” whereby believers continue to work and expand their families in the afterlife. Here we encounter a true innovation in the annals of capitalist theology: having already boosted church membership via the posthumous conversion of ancestors, the Mormons have also staked out the afterlife as a locale of ongoing entrepreneurial activity.

This brings us back to Clayton Christensen, who is occasionally quizzed by his students about the risk-to-reward ratio of religious faith. In this view, the Mormon vision of the afterlife seems no less disruptive:

One of them said, “You know, Clay, I’ve been thinking of becoming religious.”
And I said, “Well, that’s neat.”
And he said, “But the MPB [an economist’s acronym for marginal personal benefit] is awful.”
And I said, “What do you mean?”
He said, “Well, imagine that I become religious, and that I do everything that God says He wants me to do. And then I get to Heaven. What do you do in Heaven? Do you sit around all day on a cloud? If that’s what eternity is like, man, that’s an awful MPB. I have to give up everything in life that’s fun—and that’s the reward!”

But the great thing about the Mormon Church is that when somebody asks what you do in Heaven, we have an answer. Now, everybody else might not say into it. But at least we’ve got a plan. And the rest of them don’t have a plan.

If you squint a bit to decipher the sweep of the Mormon landscape— noting how efficiently it shores up the core, embattled features of the Horatio Alger myth of individualist success—you can appreciate that today’s generation of fretful pundits should be less preoccupied with the question of whether the Mormons are truly like us, and more focused on the extent to which we now resemble them.

Putting aside Glenn Beck, who is an actual convert, there are plenty of other prominent apostles of the Mormon-style gospel of wealth who have established wildly popular ministries in the Protestant mainstream. The “prosperity gospel” of the aptly named Creflo Dollar crassly markets an assurance of wealth as the sign of divine blessing, in a manner almost identical to the vision extolled in the Book of Mormon. The ministry of Joel Osteen—who is, like Dollar, a Word of Faith preacher in the Pentecostal tradition, and who presides over the largest megachurch in the country—plainly affirms that God “wants you to succeed; He created you to live abundantly.” Indeed, the prosperity gospel is perhaps the most popular and dynamic strain of evangelical worship today, even as the American economy continues to produce punishing levels of joblessness, wage theft, and wealth inequality.

None of the prosperity gospel’s proponents are themselves Mormon. Yet their message on the economic implications of faith—that God wants believers to be rich, that individuals are responsible for their own economic fate, that government is to be distrusted—aligns perfectly with the Mormon tradition. And polls show that American Protestants are less inclined than ever to a belief in hell and damnation. Instead they seek refuge in a sunny, sprawling body of self-help and business-advice literature—of which another Mormon savant, Stephen Covey, is the unrivaled modern master. To paraphrase Milton Friedman’s celebrated remark on the legacy of John Maynard Keynes, one can easily survey the leading figures of mainstream religious and business thought in America today and pronounce, “We are all Mormons now.”

Mormons gravitate quite naturally to the corporate elite. As Mark Skousen observes, the long tenure of the Mormon mafia at Harvard Business School was very much of a piece with the Saints’ vision of their worldly calling: “There is a desire on the part of Mormons to be influential in the right circles and to get the right kinds of degrees, and it’s even encouraged in the church hierarchy now. So BYU [Brigham Young University] graduates often go to graduate school at Ivy League schools, and are really encouraged to push in that direction, and they’re also very prolific.”

Seen in this light, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman are Mormon candidates par excellence. They are both scions of major business empires—and apart from Steve Forbes, who mounted protest campaigns in 1996 and 2000, they are the first such silver-spoon presidential hopefuls since John F. Kennedy and Nelson Rockefeller during the 1960s. Mitt’s father, George Romney, was the governor of Michigan and a G.O.P. presidential candidate in his own right in 1968, but was best known for steering...
American Motors Corp. back from the brink of bankruptcy by relentlessly promoting the first major compact car in 1959, the AMC Rambler. Chemical magnate Jon Huntsman Sr., meanwhile, came into his billions by designing and marketing the Styrofoam shell containers for Big Macs, after pursuing a long string of other main-chance marketing schemes. (Even as he worked in the Nixon White House as personal aide to the president, the elder Huntsman was also selling greatest-hits compilations by such easy-listening stalwarts as Perry Como and Andy Williams in supermarket chains.)

The vast majority of rank-and-file Mormons are not, of course, scions of wealth. Demographic research indicates that the Saints are no more affluent than the members of mainline Protestant denominations. However, the business outlook of the faith is deeply corporatist, reflecting a vision of central economic organization that is again unique among American Protestant sects. This, too, is largely a legacy of the church’s search for a stable outpost on the American frontier.

During the church’s initial forays in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, it was in fact a socialist enterprise. All property was held in common and managed by Smith and his senior lieutenants—one of whom, Sidney Rigdon, was an evangelical socialist. However, the post-Smith church evolved into a virtual corporation, with elders assembling a number of joint-stock proposals, administered by the Perpetual Emigration Fund, to stake immigrant converts to land holdings in Utah. Under the authoritarian hand of Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, the trademark Mormon rage for order gathered decisive force. In Utah, Young oversaw the creation of a vast business cooperative, known as Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution, which was meant to prevent Eastern enterprises operated by gentiles (as Mormons called all non-Mormons) from gaining a foothold in the territory. The cooperative is said to have dispatched spies to report on Mormon settlers caught trading with outsiders. It also spawned successful livestock, textile, and banking concerns.

This top-down model of economic organization remains firmly in place. The church has its own welfare system, which distributes its own line of food and consumer products under the proprietary Deseret brand. It also holds extensive corporate investments, which are not fully disclosed—but in a 2007 study called Mormon America, Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling fix the church’s total assets at somewhere between $25 billion and $30 billion. (For the sake of comparison, the Ostlings note that a similarly sized U.S. denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, possesses $152 million in stock holdings, mainly to secure its employees’ pension plans.) The Mormon church owns a $16-billion insurance company, at least $6 billion in stocks, and a $172-million chain of radio stations, as well as more than 150 farms and ranches, which easily places the church among the largest landowners in the nation.

The corporate-managerial outlook shared by both Mormon presidential hopefuls has already made for some tensions with Tea Party purists. Romney, having spent most of his career in equity-fund management, supported the 2008 Troubled Asset Recovery Plan bailouts of the teetering banking industry. Huntsman, meanwhile, has fielded flak from the right for accepting $1.6 billion in stimulus funds for Utah, while also endorsing cap-and-trade proposals to mitigate the impact of global warming.

Mormon economic thinkers, though, don’t really experience any such tensions—not any more than they feel the roiling inner anxieties at the heart of the Protestant ethic. The consolidation of shareholder
value meshes readily in the Mormon world with a vision of the entrepreneurial spirit of the heartland. As Kim Clark, the former dean of the Harvard Business School, told journalist Jeff Benedict in *The Mormon Way of Doing Business*: “I grew up in a home where we were not only expected to make our bed, do the dishes, do our chores, and go to Church and say our prayers, but we were expected to be a leader and do it well. This has had a significant influence on how I think about the world and what I do and how I do it.”

Clark goes on to recall how his mother sent him off to school each day by grabbing his lapels and issuing a rather blunt exhortation: “Remember who you are.”

It’s worth noting that Clark, like his erstwhile Harvard colleague Christensen, sees the well-managed believer’s vocation stretching far beyond terrestrial family life into the realm of eternal progression. In this view of things, personal growth is inseparable from cosmology. “Your view of things, personal growth is realm of eternal progression. In this beyond terrestrial family life into the spiritual, with more than 2.6 million copies sold. But more fundamentally, Ruff’s alarmist tract shows how a provision-minded Mormon of certain bedrock economic convictions views the prospect of a long-term economic crisis.

The late Seventies, of course, were a time of exceedingly bad economic news, with interest rates north of 18 percent and inflation, fed by spikes in oil prices, above 13 percent. And Ruff was well positioned to serve as a popular prophet of the age. Like many Mormon strivers, he was a tireless entrepreneur, first as the proprietor of an Evelyn Wood speed-reading franchise. But that enterprise went belly-up, courtesy of a Bay Area newspaper strike that killed an enormous ad buy, sending the young Ruff into bankruptcy. Undaunted, he fastened onto his next project—an emergency food-storage business, inspired by a jeremiad on the specter of inflation he’d picked up at an airport bookstore. Thanks to the prevalence of both environmental doomsaying and manipulated scarcity, Ruff made his food-hoarding business handsomely profitable, and sold it off to stake his career as an investment guru.

In his introduction to *How to Prosper*, Ruff attributes a good deal of his durable financial acumen to “my Mormon upbringing, which stressed prudence, avoidance of unsound debt, and a kind of 19th-century rugged self-sufficiency.” What’s more, he claimed that his investing outlook stemmed directly from his role as a Mormon provider: “I am concerned about the hard times I see coming, and my family will have to live in that world. I want to prepare them to get through without physical discomfort, and with fundamental Judeo-Christian values intact, and I’m working very hard to see that sound principles of ethics, morality, and economics are passed on to my offspring.”

Yet the analysis he offered in *How to Prosper* was as shrill, misguided, and dogmatically antigovernment as any anatomy of that dark time could have been. There is also a distinct undercurrent of racial animus in Ruff’s vision of a fast-collapsing urban America—a reminder that LDS social morality had long been tainted by the explicitly racist tenets of the Book of Mormon, which holds that God bestows his blessing on loyal believers by making their skin whiter. Indeed, it was only in 1978 that the church finally reversed its policy that had barred blacks from serving as priests.

In Ruff’s view of things, inflation was a permanent besieging force, systematically hollowing out the value of every single dollar earned and invested in the U.S. economy. Of course, there was only one body responsible for this curse: the federal government. According to Ruff, the government prints up a limitless supply of paper currency only for the sake of buying up constituencies—entitlement-fattened supporters who stir themselves out of their welfare and Social Security stupors just long enough to keep reelecting their national representatives. Even vigilant savers and workers with cost-of-living escalation clauses in their contracts were, as Ruff saw it, “raped by inflation (and government is the pervert that does it).”

Since the expansion of government debt leaches into the global economy, thanks to big lending programs underwritten by sinister internationalist groups, well, the whirlwind would be reaped soon enough. Ruff predicted that American cities would be especially hard hit, with New York City’s mid-Seventies brush with bankruptcy little more than a dry run for the ensuing chaos. He wrote: “A significant segment of New York is a deteriorating jungle where civilization has ceased to exist, and so is the core of many of our larger cities…. City neighborhoods have moved toward one-race groupings—inbred, hostile ghettos with a garrison mentality toward the rest of the world. We have lost most of the gains we have made in social relations and this holds the seeds of race war.”

Fortunately, Ruff held out hope for savvy investors seeking to escape this urban-racial-inflationary nightmare—and the opportunity to realize solid returns in the bargain. Lesson one was to flee the nation’s cities, and leverage your money out of urban-based investments into
small-town real estate. Back in the days when *How to Prosper* was published, real estate was indeed a sound hedge against inflation. But Ruff was seeking to sell readers on something else: small-town living as a survival strategy. The solution wasn’t to go off the grid and retreat to a cabin in the mountains with a ten-year supply of food. No, the reasonable course of action, in Ruff’s estimation, was to “take [your] chances in a small town and assume that America can come staggering back like Rasputin.”

But the second step toward financial security in the Ruff plan was the key: the hoarding of gold and silver. The first order of business, naturally, was to lay in some coins of each metal, since they would be most readily convertible in a crisis. But really, Ruff reasoned, gold in its pure metal form also represented the best long-term investment plan in the event of an inflationary Grand Guignol. Not since Joseph Smith’s surreptitious treasure-hunting expedition to Salem had a prominent American writer invested the idea of sequestered gold with such magic, all-healing properties.

The natural corollary was that any “socially created” wealth was illegitimate and hideous. That’s why *How to Prosper* also stands as one of the earliest and most full-throated diatribes against Social Security. The retirement plan is a “Ponzi chain letter,” as well as “the most dishonest, reprehensible, deceitfully unsound scheme ever foisted by government upon a trusting public—a fraud so huge that the imagination is inadequate to grasp it.” Ruff reserved a special place in hell for the cotton-headed creators of this “irresponsible, inevitably bankrupt plan.”

Never mind that the “bankrupt plan” has run a surplus for much of the past thirty years—and indeed, in spite of a generation’s worth of right-wing bluster, that it continues to do so today. And never mind that virtually every development prophesied in *How to Prosper* failed to materialize. There was no Weimar-style hyperinflation: after Ruff’s book was published, inflation tapered off from its modern high-water mark of 15 percent. By 1982, in fact, the economy was in a deep recession. In response, the Reagan Administration taxed and spent its way out of that slump via Keynesian-style deficit outlays for ballooning defense budgets and a 1982 tax increase—measures that would make hard-money conservatives woozy with acute cognitive dissonance, if they could bring themselves to acknowledge that they ever took place.

But again, the historical record isn’t the point in this brand of fantasy. And that’s why, come 2009, Edward Ruff re-emerged with an updated tract called *How to Prosper in the Age of Obamanomics*. In this outing, the author concedes that he made several key miscalculations in his later investing career, among them a bet that the Y2K transition would trigger an enormous wave of bank failures. But with that moment of contrition out of the way, Ruff returns to the hard-money warpath. “Socialist entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and compulsory health care will cause inflation,” he argues. And of course Obama himself is an ACORN-appeasing, terrorist-befriending leftist whose administration is “totally committed to government-controlled socialism.” Once again, there is only one sure refuge. As the paper-and-debt delusions of government-run economics collapse into a smoldering ruin, the world will “instinctively go back to gold and silver as a means of exchange and store of value.”

Lo and behold: in July, six Republican presidential candidates joined an Iowa bus tour to promote a return to the gold standard. On the economic right, no less than in the pulpits of the prosperity gospel, most of the major players are all but officially Mormons now. One need look no further for the policy implications of this dramatic shift than Washington’s pitched battle over increasing the nation’s debt ceiling.

This was formerly a routine procedure in the processing of federal spending—akin to taking out a new, higher-balance credit card to manage household debt. But over the course of the absurd confrontation between the White House and Congress, the debt-ceiling question took on an existential importance for the right, which makes sense only if one approaches it in religious terms. It mattered little that government spending and public debt are critical instruments for sustaining demand and growth in a badly flailing economy. And it mattered still less that the Republican Congress was inveighing righteously against unsustainable levels of government spending that were, in reality, run up by past Republican Congresses. Conservative lawmakers aligned with the Tea Party were absolutely determined to make a stand on rising government spending—even though the debt-ceiling decision hinged on federal money that was already spent. And in spite of opposition from the Senate, from President Obama, and even from voters, a majority of whom favored tax hikes to balance out spending cuts, they got their way.

In its fraught and destructive his- trionics, the debt-ceiling debacle calls to mind another of Joseph Smith’s prophecies, which both Mormons and their detractors tend to dust off in moments of national crisis. Not long before his death, Smith spoke to a small group of his followers, assuring them that Mormons would rise up to claim their special, divinely mandated stature in the New World when the American republican experiment fell to pieces.

“You will see the constitution of the United States almost destroyed,” Smith proclaimed. “It will hang by a thread.” With the federal government in shambles, he predicted, the Mormon church would dispatch elders “to gather the honest in America and assume that America can come staggering back like Rasputin.”

And of course Obama himself is an ACORN-appeasing, terrorist-befriending leftist whose administration is “totally committed to government-controlled socialism.” Once again, there is only one sure refuge. As the paper-and-debt delusions of government-run economics collapse into a smoldering ruin, the world will “instinctively go back to gold and silver as a means of exchange and store of value.”
thread” phrase as a kind of dog-whistle code to the faithful.1

But one needn't endorse breathless rumors of theocratic conspiracy to note how the American debt crisis—and most important, the framing of the issue on the right—has come about via the same apocalyptic mood of alarm conveyed in Smith's declaration. Tea Party strategists are deeply invested in their image as guardians of the American constitutional tradition, long denigrated by liberal secularism and fiscal license. And like Smith's original auditors in Illinois, they see themselves as a beleaguered and persecuted faith, now encircled by an implacably hostile federal state.

It is certainly no secret that, in institutional terms, the Mormon church has furnished a critical plank of the modern conservative coalition. That development goes back to the first Reagan White House, which still boasts the greatest number of senior Mormon staffers of any American presidency. LDS officials are quick to point out that the church and its leaders do not endorse candidates or take part in national politics. Still, rank-and-file Mormons have demonstrated a very strong activist and financial stake in conservative causes and the Republican party. Mormon donors famously flooded the coffers of the successful 2008 campaign to ban gay marriage in California, contributing more than $4 million, with many of those donations coming from out of state. Nobody was astonished when the 2008 McCain–Palin ticket registered a large margin of victory—a commanding 28 percent—in Utah. During that same election cycle, Romney raised more money in Utah than he had in his home state of Massachusetts. Mormon fundraising for the next cycle is sure to be even heftier: during a recent telethon in Nevada, a key Mormon stronghold and early primary state, Romney took in $10 million in a single day.

Amid all the high-flying fund-raising and culture-war choreography, it's easy to mistake the Mormons for just one more conservative interest group—something akin to, say, the Business Roundtable, with a robust “values” agenda. But the church's real gift to the right has been its sense of persecution and embattled faith. Of course, these have been key ingredients of the conservative coalition since the evangelical right first stirred to life with Reagan's 1980 landslide. Yet the old religious right was always a skeptical partner in its shotgun marriage with business conservatism. Fundamentalists found consumer capitalism, with its loose morals and easy credit, a hard pill to swallow. Meanwhile, free-market boosters resigned themselves to buying off senior evangelicals with lobbying dosh—as Jack Abramoff did in his unholy alliance with Ralph Reed—and cynically pledging, in each new campaign cycle, to stomp out the mortal threats of gay marriage and abortion on demand.

Something, in other words, had to give. And in the aftermath of the debt-ceiling brinkmanship, we are now beginning to apprehend just what that something is. The conservative revolt against the established government order is acquiring a new spiritual force. Rather than standing by as Treasury officials insist on protecting our credit ratings, the American right is repudiating the very idea of credit as an immoral and political fabrication. Warned that their actions may deeply damage an already reeling U.S. economy, Tea Party patriots decry Democratic scare tactics—while also preaching the wisdom of personal thrift and gold-hoarding, even though neither practice has yet to lift a modern industrial economy out of a recession. Economic and theological thinking on the American right have merged, and, in a good many speeches from the House floor, have become virtually indistinguishable. This a very striking, and very fraught, Mormon moment all its own. You might even say the republic is hanging by a thread.

1 No doubt because of its explosive connotations, the Mormon church has officially distanced itself from the White Horse Prophecy, stressing that it is not part of approved doctrine, even though numerous Mormon leaders from Brigham Young on down have casually treated it as such. In addition, some Mormon historians still contest whether Smith ever delivered such an address. For what it's worth, however, Mark Skousen cites the prophecy as the motive behind his uncle's publishing and lecturing career. W. Cleon Skousen, his nephew says, believed “that one of his callings was to educate the Latter-day Saints in the principles of the Constitution. Because there's this prophecy from Joseph Smith that one day the Constitution would hang by a thread and the elders would rise up. And so he thought it was important that they be educated.”