During the 1850s, ideological and actual battles raged in Kansas and Utah territories over the notion of popular sovereignty, a principle wherein the voice of the people determined the territories’ domestic and political institutions, outside of congressional or presidential influence. In Kansas, for example, politicians sought to remove the slavery question from national political discourse by making it a local decision. Contesting views over instituting slavery in Kansas resulted in the people drafting two competing constitutions in two different towns—one (Topeka) favoring freedom, the other (Lecompton) advocating slavery. This fundamental disagreement culminated in a series of violent clashes and guerrilla raids between the opposing forces in what was called “Bleeding Kansas.” Instead of resolving the slavery question, however, the violence in Kansas revealed the flaws in the philosophy of local self-determination and brought the territorial issue of slavery’s expansion into the center of national debate. While Kansas’s role in the coming of the Civil War is quite well known, historians have generally not examined Utah’s territorial experimentation through the lens of popular sovereignty.

Brent M. Rogers’s excellent book *Unpopular Sovereignty: Mormons and the Federal Management of Early Utah Territory* corrects this oversight, placing Utah Territory firmly at the center of the national debate over the extension of slavery into the territories. Rogers is a historian and documentary editor for the *Joseph Smith Papers* and an instructor of history and religious education at the Brigham Young University–Salt Lake Center. This book stemmed from his revised dissertation, which he completed at the University of Nebraska. Rogers’s great strength in this thoroughly researched and balanced account is teasing out and analyzing the multifaceted opinions from the original documents to


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persuasively argue that Utah Territory emerged as a key battleground and hotbed of antebellum debate over popular sovereignty.

Unpopular Sovereignty is organized into successive chapters discussing the American territorial system, plural marriage, and Mormon and federal Indian policies. He concludes with two chapters analyzing the 1856 election and how it set the stage for the Republican Party’s rejection of polygamy and slavery and for the Democratic Party’s decision to send federal troops west, precipitating the Utah War, to replace Brigham Young as territorial governor and as superintendent of Indian affairs. The book concludes with the consolidation of federal power under Republican ascendancy during the Civil War in 1862 and a discussion of how and why Lincoln helped to end popular sovereignty in the territories.

Following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the majority of Mormons united under the leadership of Brigham Young and traveled west to form a Mormon colony in Mexico. Shortly after establishing Great Salt Lake City and other towns in the Intermountain West, Mormons found themselves back in the United States after the signing of the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War. They petitioned for an autonomous state of Deseret, but those petitions failed. In 1850, the federal government formed Utah Territory, and the president named Young as territorial governor and ex-officio superintendent of Indian affairs. Utah’s republican form of government resembled a theocracy with Young simultaneously serving as Church president, territorial governor, Indian superintendent, and ecclesiastical judge—Young had the final say in all matters.

This did not sit well with non-Mormon federal judges and Indian agents in Utah Territory appointed by U.S. President Millard Fillmore. These disgruntled federal employees criticized Young and the Mormons for functioning as a theocracy and not as a republican form of government. They disapproved of Mormon missionaries proselyting among indigenous peoples, claiming the practice violated trade and intercourse laws. Most importantly, in 1852 the LDS Church publicly announced the practice of plural marriage, claiming it was a religious rite, not a civil one, and thereby protected under the First Amendment and considered constitutional.

Rogers asserts that in comparison to other territories, Utah posed an entirely different national problem with regard to popular sovereignty. He cogently argues that three interrelated themes highlight Utah’s experience of contested sovereignty: “the implementation of a republican form of government; the administration of Indian policy that managed
interactions between Native peoples and non-Natives; and the performance of gender and familial relations pertaining to marriage” (5). Rogers argues that Mormons employed the concept imperium in imperio (sovereignty within sovereignty) to protect and govern themselves. Local governance in general and the domestic institution of plural marriage, however, just like the extension of slavery into Kansas, drew Utah into the national political discourse. Moreover, when repeated attempts for statehood (and the sovereignty that would bring through the Tenth Amendment) failed, Mormons took matters into their own hands. They subsumed indigenous Great Basin peoples’ sovereignty and ignored or contested federal sovereignty in order to carve out their own version of self-determination in Utah Territory and build the kingdom of God, while still adhering to the U.S. Constitution.

In 1856, these interrelated themes culminated in both national political parties agreeing to force Utah’s Mormon population into submission by changing their government, taking over Indian affairs, eradicating polygamy, and diminishing the size of the territory. The political platform of the newly formed Republican Party equated slavery and polygamy as the twin pillars of barbarism. And the Democratic Party, which had initially championed popular sovereignty, found it necessary to subordinate Utah Territory to national sovereignty by force of arms.

President James Buchanan sent twenty-five hundred troops to Utah to reassert federal control by ending Young’s theocracy. This would be done by replacing Young and all Mormon political officials with non-Mormon personnel supported by the military, preventing Mormon missionaries from sowing supposed anti-American sentiment among the Indian nations and, finally, using federal force to curtail the practice of polygamy. The U.S. Army also established military reservations at Fort Bridger and Camp Floyd to control the overland trails through the territory.

Utah, as much as Kansas, served as a test case for popular sovereignty. The Democrats’ use of federal force to attempt to stop polygamy in 1857 with the Utah Expedition mirrored Republican measures in 1862 to use federal force to end slavery in the South. Republicans used those same arguments of federal sovereignty to distribute western lands as homesteads while simultaneously dispossessing and removing Native peoples to reservations. They criminalized polygamy by passing the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862. Republicans sought to unite the nation by authorizing the construction of a transcontinental railroad, but they needed the support of the Mormons, since the proposed route went
through Promontory Summit in Utah Territory. President Lincoln and Brigham Young entered into a détente wherein Lincoln would not press the polygamy issue and the Mormons would support the construction of the rails. Eastern lawmakers hoped the influx of many non-Mormons to Utah Territory via the railroad would weaken and eventually overwhelm Mormon hegemony in the territory. Finally, Lincoln sought to end slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Utah War represents perhaps the most important antebellum example of the ascension and extension of federal control over territorial governments, Indian affairs, and infrastructural development in the West. Western expansion tested whether the United States would endure or not. Rogers’s Unpopular Sovereignty aptly demonstrates that the Mormon question, the Indian question, and the slavery question were each answered by the extension of national sovereignty over Utah Territory and the entire nation.

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