All to no avail. In fact, statehood seemed to become more elusive as time went on, because those opposed to Utah statehood could generate emotional opposition through the issue of PLURAL MARRIAGE. In 1865, Schuyler Colfax, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, visited Utah and pointedly warned Brigham Young that his territory could never become a state so long as the Church upheld polygamy. Latter-day Saints persisted in the practice, which for another generation blocked Utah’s admission as a state.

After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled decisively against plural marriage in 1879 (see REYNOLDS v. UNITED STATES), federal officials began to enforce laws more firmly during what became known as the antipolygamy raid (see ANTIPOLYGAMY LEGISLATION). The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, intended to bar polygamists from voting, was still pending in Congress when LDS agents secured approval from President Grover Cleveland’s administration and from President of the Church John Taylor for a strategy of seeking statehood by accepting a Utah constitution prohibiting plural marriage. President Taylor’s belief in plural marriage remained unaltered, but he recognized that elected state officials would likely enforce marriage laws more leniently than appointed federal officials had done. In mid-1887 such a constitution was framed and ratified in Utah. Despite these efforts, congressional Democrats balked at delivering statehood until the Church gave up polygamy.

Soon thereafter, the First Presidency of the Church, acting as a committee on statehood, began working with members of the Republican party. Some Republicans had been hostile to the Church and its marriage practices; others recognized the value of the Mormon vote throughout the West. With the assistance of friendly Republican party leaders, George Q. Cannon, counselor in the First Presidency, and others thwarted a proposed law that would have disfranchised all LDS voters, not just the polygamists. Yet, the threat of such legislation persisted, along with the even more ominous peril that the four Utah temples stood in danger of being confiscated under provisions of the Edmunds-Tucker Act.

Church leaders early faced the irony that the statehood and home rule desired as an additional protection for the Church and its institutions could seemingly be obtained only by yielding a part of the religious life they wished to protect. With ever
harsher legislation, they now faced the necessity of bending on less central matters in order to protect the core mission and essential ordinances of the Church. In these circumstances, Church President Wilford Woodruff fervently sought and received divine direction. Accordingly, he publicly announced in his 1890 Manifesto that he would no longer permit plural marriages in opposition to the laws of the United States, thus removing the main obstacle to Utah statehood and protecting the temples and other matters central to the faith.

Perhaps the most important remaining problem to be resolved before Utah could gain statehood was normalizing political affairs within the territory. Up to that time, non-LDS voters had mainly backed the so-called Liberal party, while Church members belonged to the People’s party, primarily associated in national affairs with the Democrats. LDS leaders recognized the necessity of convincing party members in Congress that Utah voters were not irrevocably aligned with the Democrats. It was time for Utah politics to mirror the federal, with the Democratic and Republican parties both being strong. This took place with impressive dispatch through determined efforts by John Henry Smith, an apostle, and others. At their urging, local LDS leaders—and in some cases entire congregations—were divided along national party lines.

However, as Republican party members became more convinced that admission of Utah as a state might give them two more U.S. senators in the closely balanced upper house, Democratic lawmakers became less committed to the cause of statehood, necessitating complex and intense behind-the-scenes lobbying efforts. The chief agents in these negotiations were Bishop Hiram B. Clawson and his relative Colonel Isaac Trumbo, a close friend of President Wilford Woodruff, whose effective lobbying with Republican lawmakers was of critical importance. Through a series of discussions and agreements, Trumbo and Clawson finally regained the cooperation of key Democratic leaders, partly by agreeing that actual admission of the state would not take place until 1896, after Democrats had an opportunity to complete their congressional agenda without the possible opposition of Republican senators from Utah.

The enabling act for admission was passed in July 1894, allowing a state constitutional convention to meet in early 1895. Once the constitution was approved by the U.S. Congress, it was submitted to Utah citizens for ratification at the same time that they elected their first state officers. Finally, on January 4, 1896, President Grover Cleveland proclaimed Utah a state, the forty-fifth, and the new government went into effect two days later.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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UTAH TERRITORY

The arrival of the Latter-day Saints in the Salt Lake Valley in July 1847 preceded by only a few months the transfer of the Utah area and much more of the American Southwest from Mexico to the United States. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848, making the transfer final. A petition requesting the United States to grant statehood to the Utah area was delivered in 1849, but statehood was not granted. Instead, Utah Territory was created as part of the national Compromise of 1850. The compromise

Celebrating Utah’s admission to the United States in 1896, the Salt Lake Temple is draped with a huge flag of the United States. Courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Utah Libraries.