

Andean Avalanche Strikes the Wasatch

MISSIONARIES AND TERROR: THE ASSASSINATION OF TWO ELDERS IN BOLIVIA

By David Knowlton

LATE ON 24 MAY 1989 IN THE LUGUBRIOUS HALF-LIGHT AND narrow, cobble-stoned streets of La Paz's cemetery district, two Anglo Mormon missionaries were smoothly and cruelly assassinated. For the first time ever guerrillas deliberately struck at representatives of the LDS church. While such an attack could have been predicted given the presence of terrorism worldwide, what could not have been known earlier was where and why.

The tragic deaths of these two missionaries have serious implications for the Church's presence in this region and elsewhere. Our presence in such countries has become politicized, despite our best efforts to appear non-political. To understand why we have become a political target requires that we explore the logic behind this act of violence and its social reality.

The assassinations in Bolivia occurred within a context of increasing violence against LDS church property in South America. Since 1983, when two Colombian LDS meeting houses were bombed eight times by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)—as a sequel to its kidnapping of the brother of the Colombian president ostensibly to obtain higher wages, a price freeze, and less expensive public services—the Church has become a prime target of the militant left.¹

Despite brief notices in the *Church News* or other Salt Lake papers about an LDS chapel in some country being bombed, North American Mormons have never been afforded a comprehensive picture of the growth of attacks against the Church in Latin America. Following the missionaries' deaths a spate of articles surfaced for a time with contradictory, incomplete, and somewhat misrepresented information. If nothing else they indicated the seriousness of the challenge facing the Church, even if they failed to provide a thorough portrayal of the

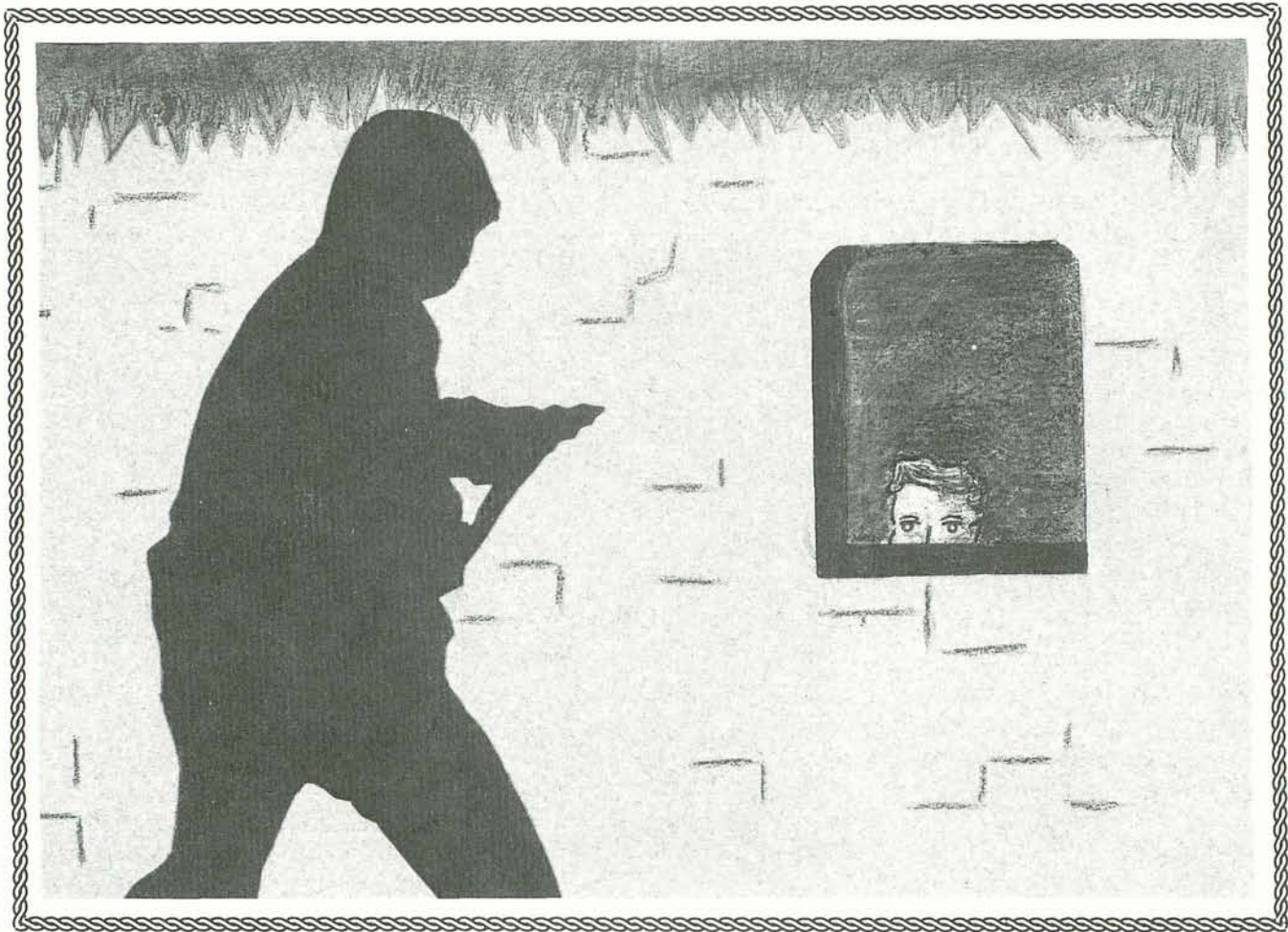
numbers of bombings, of the groups claiming responsibility, or of police and intelligence efforts to apprehend the guilty.

On 4 July 1985 six chapels were bombed in Chile, apparently by the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, Chile's most important armed opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship.² The FPMR intends to end the Pinochet dictatorship by attacking what it sees as the regime's social, ideological, and political supports in order to promote a popular uprising against it.³ For some reason, the FPMR considers the LDS church an important target. In the twelve months after the 4 July bombings, FPMR members attacked thirty-one other chapels, often leaving proselyting materials in which they denounced "yankee imperialism" and accused the Church of being a "yankee church."⁴ Since then the Church in Chile has suffered continued bombings and armed attacks.

The U.S. State Department claims that since 1984 terrorists have hit LDS targets in Latin America sixty-two times: forty-six in Chile, seven in the Dominican Republic, five in Bolivia, three in Colombia, one in Argentina, and one in Venezuela.⁵ Of all U.S.-based institutions operating in Latin America, the LDS church seems to have been targeted more often than others, including U.S. banks and industries. We face a systematic campaign of violence against the Church that will increase during the region's projected economic crisis of the 1990s.

WHY have guerrilla groups across the continent decided to focus so much against the Mormons? When I posed this question to a group of Bolivian scholars gathered in a special, late-night meeting behind the thick stone walls of the National Museum of Ethnology and Folklore in La Paz, they, too, were surprised at the extent of violence against the Church. The missionaries' assassination and subsequent heavy-handed investigation by the national police made them reluctant to talk about specifics. Nonetheless they observed that the Church appeared suddenly in Bolivia in what looked like a massive, well-financed

DAVID KNOWLTON, an assistant professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, specializes in Latin America. A version of this paper was presented at the Sunstone Symposium XI in Salt Lake City on 26 August 1989.



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campaign of institutional hegemony. Almost overnight the Church constructed luxurious chapels throughout the poor neighborhoods of the city and deployed a large force of missionaries from the United States who stood out no matter how hard they tried not to. The scholars asked me if Mormon chapels in the United States are as elegant and were concerned about the relationship between this army of Mormons and the penetration of their society by multinational corporations and the U.S. government's anti-drug squad. They mentioned that politics in their country had become sacralized and that foreign governments had used the churches, Catholic and others, to gather intelligence and to promote particular political and social lines. They argued that the Mormon church, and other proselyting churches, are perceived as part of an imperialistic conspiracy to prevent the Bolivian masses from achieving their hopes through a meaningful democracy. They pointed out that other U.S. groups, such as the Peace Corps, had been kicked out of Bolivia because of their involvement in "imperialist" efforts at population control. In sum, they argued that the sudden appearance of this obviously wealthy foreign institution with so many young "yankee" proselyting missionaries is a *prima facie* cause

for suspicion and could account for the increasing anti-Mormon violence throughout the region.

When I posed this question to the La Paz mission president, Stephen R. Wright, he answered that the terrorist actions are anti-American, not anti-Mormon, the Church being mistakenly viewed as an arm of the U.S. government. In a press interview, he added: "We are being targeted unfairly as imperialists. . . . It's a terrible unprovoked attack on innocent victims who have nothing to do with the philosophies of this or any other group." "Indeed, Church spokespersons generally stress the same thing, insisting that "this church is a world church and we do not represent the U.S." While this position represents a public relations policy, it also is in agreement with the Bolivian scholars that the Church is perceived as an instrument of U.S. policy and North American penetration of other countries.

Why does this connection between the Church and "American imperialism" so consistently appear? Is it simply a misperception of some relationship between the U.S. government and the Church, or is it a broader perceived reality to which we actively, although unknowingly, contribute? It is easy to dismiss the guerrillas' justification for their actions as distorted,

contrived, or misguided. In fact, elites under attack commonly use this same response to revolutionary writings as a means of denying legitimacy to “subversives.”⁸ If subversives can simply be dismissed as fools, then elites do not have to answer their challenge.

WHY is the Church being challenged? To begin answering this we must take seriously the guerrillas’ social background and statements of purpose.

Immediately after the two missionaries were shot by three people in a yellow Volkswagen, a handwritten statement arrived at La Paz newspapers in which a relatively unknown group, the Frente Armada de Liberación Zárata Willka (the Zárata Willka Armed Liberation Front), claimed responsibility.⁹ Initially Bolivian and American officials claimed that the group was probably connected with drug traffickers, since it was primarily known for a failed attempt to assassinate then U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz. Although spokespersons for the U.S. Embassy in La Paz now dismiss a possible drug connection, LDS officials in Bolivia still hold to the argument. Another current of the Bolivian press reported a strong fear that the reappearance of the FAL Zárata Willka marked the eruption of the Sendero Luminoso—the Peruvian Shining Path guerrilla movement—within the country.

Although there may be a connection, FAL Zárata Willka differs from both the Shining Path and drug traffickers in that a disproportionate share of its activities centers on attacking the Mormon church and in the “Indianism” of its proclamations. Besides the assassination of the missionaries and the attack on Schultz’s motorcade, FAL Zárata Willka assassinated a Peruvian military attaché who fought against the Sendero. The day after the missionaries’ assassination FAL Zárata Willka exploded a bomb at the entrance to the national Legislative Palace, almost killing the president of the Chamber of Deputies. It simultaneously exploded twenty bombs at political offices in La Paz to disrupt the recent presidential elections.

Before the missionaries’ assassination, FAL Zárata Willka bombed an LDS chapel in the La Paz neighborhood of Villa Victoria, severely damaging the entrance and exterior facade. According to sources in the Presiding Bishopric’s office in La Paz, this was not reported to Bolivia’s police. The Church preferred instead to deal with it by quietly repairing the damage. Several chapels were robbed in guerrilla actions and another in the La Paz neighborhood of Alto San Pedro had a bomb placed in it which never went off. (An early morning seminary student found it and took it home where his father immediately called the police. Miraculously, it never exploded.)

Since the missionaries’ deaths, FAL Zárata Willka has threatened to kill the mayor and council members of the suburban city of El Alto de La Paz if they did not drive all “gringos” out of the city and close its Mormon chapels. Subsequently they bombed a chapel in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and have made numerous threats against LDS and Bolivian government officials. Although recently, with a new government installed in Bolivia, things have quieted, the threats and violence will probably continue against what the guerrillas consider to be symbols of the “bourgeois state.”

The political connections of FAL Zárata Willka are not known, but other groups have begun targeting the Mormon church. For example, the political leadership of a densely populated region near Lake Titicaca decided to oust all American missionaries from the area on “pain of death.” As a result missionaries have been withdrawn and the flourishing Aymara-speaking Indian branches left on their own. Church officials in Bolivia now fear the spreading of “copy-cat” anti-Mormon activities by groups unaffiliated with the guerrillas.

According to sources within the U.S. Embassy, FAL Zárata Willka is a tightly organized group of revolutionary cells. In its investigation, the Bolivian government has broken several cells, seizing arms, explosives, revolutionary literature and plans—which include plans for more attacks against LDS targets. They are not sure how large the organization is, nor do they know if they have intimidated its leadership. As many as 100 or more strongly committed guerrillas may remain.

Evidently, the ideological base of FAL Zárata Willka is built of two strains: varied Marxist revolutionary perspectives and the Indian revalidation movement known as Katarismo.¹⁰ Marxism is the language of intellectual life in much of Latin America, and a general familiarity with revolutionary theory is found among most educated people. Bolivia’s Indian majority is dominated by a Hispanic minority. Since the thirties Indian frustration has been growing, flourishing in the seventies in peasant labor unions and political parties supporting Indian revitalization. Zárata Willka himself was an Indian hero at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹

In 1985, while doing field work in Bolivia, I spent a good deal of time with young Indian intellectuals in La Paz. They freely shared with me their feelings on the need for an encounter between Indianism—a philosophy explaining their historic subordination to the country’s Spanish speaking elites—and Marxism as a revolutionary practice capable of setting a plan for action to overturn the injustice. They also expressed the terror that Christianity has wrought upon the Indian soul as it actively “massacred” indigenous deities and encouraged the rejection of ritual specialists, often by violent means. They argued that Bolivia needed to return to its

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indigenous religion as part of a total package of social inversion.

Evidently around 1985 a movement was formed among these youths to actively seek revolutionary change to improve the Indian's social and political situation. The movement proselyted among university and high school students in several of Bolivia's public institutions. Out of this material they formed a tight-knit guerrilla group which over the last year or so has become active with a vengeance.

Upon claiming responsibility for the missionaries' death, FAL Zárate Willka sent a statement to La Paz newspapers warning: yankees and their Bolivian lackeys . . . [that] the violation of our national sovereignty will not remain unpunished. The Yankee invaders who come to massacre our peasant brethren are warned, the same as their Bolivian lackeys, there remains no other path for the poor than rising up in arms. . . . Our hatred is implacable and our war is death.¹²

While the Utah press and Church spokespersons found this statement almost incomprehensible, it makes immediate sense from the perspective of leftist Latin American thought. Confusion comes from the blurring of revolutionary genres and its mixture with Indianism. Initially the phrase "massacre our peasant brethren" impeded understanding. The First Presidency wrote, "We regret that anyone would think that these representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have been sent to preach the gospel of peace would be characterized as enemies of any group."¹³ But the phrase must be understood in its full immediate sense and in its subtle reference to religious imperialism. The attack occurred during a period of struggle over the rights of small peasant holders to grow coca. The Bolivian government, under pressure from the United States, had passed legislation limiting their right to grow coca and had supported eradication efforts. The peasants of Cochabamba, with support from peasants and workers in the highlands, went on strike, demonstrating against the government's action and the intervention of foreigners—U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agents—in Bolivian affairs. In an encounter with police, a number of peasants were reportedly killed.

Bolivians of all ideological persuasions resent foreign intervention at the same time they depend on it. Since independence, this political xenophobia has formed an important part of Bolivian public rhetoric.

ALTHOUGH Mormons would argue there is no connection between them and the U.S. government's actions or those of the Bolivian government, the guerrillas see it differently. To

them the connection is so apparent that there is no need to explain or justify it.

Radical leftist ideology sees its struggle as against imperialist penetration of its society. Imperialism here does not mean territorial imperialism of the Roman sort. Instead, it refers to total domination based on economic exploitation and involves a whole series of political, cultural, and religious means of justifying and supporting the economic extraction of surplus value and the dominance by particular elites. For example, the Chilean guerrilla group FPMR, argues that the Pinochet dictatorship "sustains itself only by the unrestricted support it receives from imperialism and the force of arms." The radical leftist quest is to promote a:

national insurrection [that] consists in the paralyzation of the country through the decisive and permanent mobilization of the masses, united with the uprising of the people, in the city as well as the countryside, just as demolishing blows against the repressive forces, which taken together will lead to the political, moral, and military demoralization of the regime and permit the surprise capture by the popular masses of the principal urban centers of the country.¹⁴

Thus they attempt to attack the economic and ideological base that supports a political regime, including institutions which we

would define as religious. Our distinction between religion and politics does not work when one accepts the total concept of imperialism. The Church's insistence that it is not an American church, that it is not involved in politics, that it does not favor one political party over another, is as incomprehensible to the millions of Latin Americans drawn to the left as their statements are to us.

The Latin American left has long suspected the Church, which they see as patently Yankee. To be honest, in all but official statements, we ourselves push this line with the heavy American presence among our missionaries, our American style of worship, our authoritarian style of leadership with natives on the bottom and Americans on top with all truth flowing from Salt Lake, and with the sacralization of the U.S. Constitution and American ideals. We are seen to "buy" converts through scholarships to BYU, potential trips to the United States, social services, etc. One "centrist" Bolivian anthropologist told me that Mormons attracted converts by "holding candy before babies."

In addition, the left emphasizes the institutional Church's extensive corporate holdings as well as the unilineal flow of tithes and offerings to the top as further proof that the Church is a central part of imperialism. They see our missionary work as dividing the masses, teaching them an authoritarian

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ideology of obedience and political quietism. They see us, along with fundamentalist Protestants, as exercising a central role in the master plan of imperialism. We divide the masses and pacify them with various "opiates," thus enabling the continued domination of imperialism over their societies. Furthermore, in Bolivia, we stand accused of destroying indigenous religion and culture and of replacing it with an ideology more amenable to the demands of international imperialism.

While to us this sounds like paranoia, we need to realize that within their society it is a solid and reasonable critique of the Church that for us is obscured by a language we do not understand. In their terms, it makes sense for them to direct so much of their efforts at attacking the Church, an institution they see as central to the promotion of religious, political, and economic imperialism. In part, their argument is sustained by two sources: the conceptual underpinnings of their understanding and the social reality of the LDS church.

THE Church occupies a different social position in Latin America than it does in the United States. In many countries it is the largest single denomination after Roman Catholicism. Although the difference in relative sizes is enormous, this fact—plus that of our lavish physical presence and our huge, easily noticed missionary force—gives us a social importance far beyond our numbers. In Bolivia, for example, our 40,000 members of record places us above the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Bahai.¹⁵ Our headquarters are in a new highrise in an upper-middle class neighborhood, just down the street from the Ministry of Defense, across from the headquarters of the national police, and around the corner from the U.S. ambassador's residence. Our location has become symbolically significant as it immediately supports an association between ourselves and the "forces of repression."

Catholic scholars are concerned about our growth there and the impact our institution will have on Bolivian society. They have formed a study group of professional sociologists, many of whom are priests, to explore the Mormon presence and that of other "non-traditional" religions in Bolivia. But they complain that we are impenetrable and hence extremely difficult to study.

Political activists of all stripes are concerned about the impact we will have on the delicate political balance in the country. Generally we are thought to promulgate a "rightist" social and political philosophy. This is critical because we have established a strong niche among the working and increasingly frustrated poor. Unlike Seventh-Day Adventists or Bahais, whose base is primarily among the peasantry, ours is almost entirely an urban church. And it is precisely these poor but struggling social

sectors that can be explosively radical. In Bolivia, Peru, and Chile, guerrillas have found their angry youth fertile ground for proselyting and building revolutionary forces. In a sense we are on the front line in not just the struggle for the hearts and minds of Latin America's emergent urban masses, but for the social and political nature of their societies as well. We directly compete with guerrillas for people dedicated to a cause. For that reason our political presence is hotly debated and viewed as critical. Thus there is a certain disingenuousness when we claim to be non-political.

Religion has been involved in the political process in Latin America since the advent of the conquistadors. Frequently it enters into the contest openly and as a matter of contention. In fact Protestantism entered Latin America, sponsored at times openly and at times clandestinely by anti-clerical liberal parties as a tactical weapon in their struggle with pro-clerical conservatives. As a result, denominations such as ours are inherently colored by political calculations before we ever begin proselyting. Mormons obtained official permission to enter these countries as part of a political equation, and our ongoing presence continues as part of that process.

Furthermore religion has become politicized in much of the continent, while politics have been sacralized. With the advent of a preferential option for the poor in the wake of Vatican II Catholic Church, the Catholic hierarchy ceased to actively uphold the status quo as it traditionally had. Instead, its Christian Base Communities (CBC) have been important loci of counter-government resistance in their attempts to seek a more just society. Certainly in Nicaragua, the CBC was a critical factor behind the Sandinistas' success.¹⁶ Within the Catholic Church, leftist and rightist social philosophies wage an occasionally severe struggle for control over the institution.¹⁷ This politicization of religion generally has been further exacerbated by the apocalyptic thunderings of extremely popular fundamentalists, such as Jimmy Swaggart. In Latin America it is commonly held that fundamentalists were actively promoting the Reagan administration's right-wing agenda within the continent.

Even though the LDS church does not officially speak to those issues, it is not enough to attempt to ignore them. Our silence tacitly supports the argument that we promote a right-wing political and social ideology. The naive American anti-Marxism spread by well-meaning missionaries worsens and deepens this impression as does our language of corporatism, hierarchy, and authority. This language has strong harmonies with the still-active fascism of much of the Latin American right. The Church's basic conservativeness and the Republicanness of its hierarchy fit very differently into a Latin American political spectrum where there are viable Marxist and fascist parties

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as well as many positions in between. Unfortunately, because of the above and because of the social classes from which we choose our Latin American Church leadership, we lend too much credence to the notion that we are a right-wing church and hence involved implicitly in the right-wing social agenda for Latin America.

VIOLENCE against religious groups is not new. Indeed violent resistance to Protestantism is part of the history of proselyting on the continent and forms the ideological horizon for understanding both the acceptance and rejection of Protestantism and Mormonism by the people.

In Bolivia, there is a modest history of attempted violence against LDS missionaries that as far as I know goes unreported in the press and perhaps in Church records as well. While I was a missionary there, the elders' home in the mining camp of Huanuni was blown up, killing members who were staying there. The missionaries themselves were in Oruro at the time visiting other missionaries.

Violence, previously random, now forms a critical part of the revolutionary practice of various groups. They have singled out the LDS church from among all potential targets. As the U.S. Consul in Bolivia told me, the guerrillas could have assassinated any member of the U.S. diplomatic mission, except possibly the ambassador, had they merely desired an American target. They have not attacked other religious groups but have deliberately selected us and the Bolivian government as their targets. Across the continent other groups seem to have individually made the same strategic decision. We face a difficult challenge in Latin America now that we have become a target of sustained guerrilla activity.

Current Church efforts to reduce the risk of violence, while good in themselves, do not seem to fully comprehend the nature of the threat or its logic and history. Even native Latin missionaries and Saints are likely to become targets as "lackeys" of an imperialist church.

THERE are several things we can do:

1. Lower the profile of the Church throughout the region. In the past, a high profile has been good for proselyting, but now it may become counterproductive. We should consider simpler and less ostentatious chapels and make missionaries less visible by nativizing the force and removing their uniform.

2. Nationalize more thoroughly the individual churches, as almost every successful Protestant group did thirty years ago. Actively work to "de-United States" the Church.

3. Attempt to remove as much Yankeeism from Church prac-

tices as possible—sacralize their countries as part of the covenant land of America—and allow for controlled syncretism, such as the recreation of Mormonism within their cultural traditions.

4. Enter into informal but public dialogue with the nonrevolutionary left; our discourse has been almost entirely with the right. We desperately need balance. Although this will not change the attitude of the extreme left, it will show sympathizers that Mormonism can accommodate many leftist as well as rightist positions.

5. Develop a meaningful response to and dialogue with liberation theology, based on traditional Mormon positions of social responsibility and activism.

6. Encourage Latin American Mormons to develop their intellectuality in discussion with their own history and trends, thus broadening the Mormon cultural domain by internationalizing it. We Anglo Mormons have too much of a stranglehold on Mormon intellectual culture. We should encourage public forums like Sunstone Symposiums to develop in each national context.

7. Most importantly, we, as a people and as an institution, must recognize that our "non-partisan" position is inherently political, and we should consciously think through what that means in each national context and whether the implications of that position are acceptable or not. It is better to have a conscious, articulated non-partisan political position than the tacit, disingenuous one we currently hold.

Together these suggestions will not completely change the militant's position against the Church as a representative of imperialism, but they will remove his or her strategic relevance for attacks. No longer will guerrilla actions find an audience for violence against Mormons as they now do. ☒

NOTES

1. *Church News*, 4 December 1983.
2. On the bombing in Chile, see *Church News*, 14 July 1985. On the FP Manuel Rodriguez (FPMR), see Peter Winn, "Socialism Fades Out of Fashion," *The Nation*, 26 June 1989.
3. Terrie R. Goth, translator, "Armed Wing of the People," *Latin American Perspectives* 55:4:487-489, 1987.
4. *Deseret News*, 24 April 1986.
5. Lee Davidson, "Terrorists relatively easy on LDS targets," *Deseret News*, 22 July 1989, 1-2. "More Attacks on Church," *Deseret News*, 4 August 1989, B-1.
6. *Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 1989; *Deseret News*, 25 May 1989.
7. *Church News*, 14 July 1985.
8. *Revolution in Peru* (Berkeley, CA: Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru, 1985), pamphlet in author's possession.
9. The list of activities by the FAL Zárate Willka is compiled from Bolivian press reporting, clippings in my possession, and from statements by sources within the LDS Presiding Bishopric's office in La Paz.
10. On Katarismo, see Alain Labrousse, *Le reveil indien en Amerique andine* (Paris: Editions Pierre Marcel Faure, 1985), and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Oprimidos pero no vencidos* (La Paz: HISBOL-CSUTCB, 1984).
11. On Zárate Willka, see Ramiro Condarco Morales, *Zárate el "terrible" Willka* (La Paz, 1982).
12. *Ultima Hora*, 25 May 1989.
13. *Church News*, 14 July 1989.
14. Goth.
15. *Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1989).
16. See Daniel H. Levine, *Religion, Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).
17. Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Viking, 1989).

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