

Calling the Mormon Battalion

(From: *The Mormon Trek West*, by Joseph Brown, pp. 50-52)

On June 26, 1846, Captain James Allen arrived at Mount Pisgah to sketch out the details [of calling for troops]. [President] Polk, he said, asked for five hundred men, a full battalion, of Mormon volunteers. Enlistment would mean a year's advance clothing allowance of forty-two dollars per man. In his head, Brigham Young multiplied forty-two dollars times five hundred men. It came to twenty-one thousand dollars. That would buy a lot of stores and supplies. But the five hundred men would have to be the most able-bodied members of the party. Many of the Camp of Israel's young unmarried men had already scattered into adjoining states, seeking work whose wages would be contributed to the Saints' treasury. Five hundred Mormon teamsters, most of them with families, could hardly be spared if Young's plan for a straightforward march to the Rocky Mountains was kept. Brigham fretted about Polk's timing. "I would rather have undertaken to raise two thousand men a year ago in twenty-four hours than one hundred in a week now."

Yet, despite their open irritation at the United States for having ignored their request for help when they needed it most, the Mormons, by official commandment of the church, had vowed to respect the United States Constitution.

Brigham Young was also a realist. Already behind schedule, he realized it would be difficult to reach the Rocky Mountains even with the help of the five hundred men the United States now sought to remove from him. He thought again of the twenty-one thousand dollars and what it would buy. And he thought too of the Potawatomis, whose land on the Missouri River seemed the only suitable place to camp if the Mormons stayed over for the winter. A nomadic people who themselves had been driven from their territory, the Potawatomis were sympathetic with the Saints. The Indians were looked after by federal Indian agents. Perhaps in exchange for the battalion Polk asked for, the United States would also protect the Mormon families who must remain behind, camped for another winter, this time on the Missouri River.

Brigham called a meeting of the Council of Twelve. They agreed that Polk should have his five hundred volunteers. "The United States wants our friendship," Brigham said in a letter explaining the situation to the Saints still at Garden Grove:

The President wants to do us good and secure our confidence. The outfit of this five hundred men costs us nothing, and their pay will be sufficient to take their families over the mountains. There is war between Mexico and the United States, to whom California must fall a prey, and if we are the first settlers the old citizens cannot have a Hancock or Missouri pretext to mob the Saints. The thing is from above for our own good.

The Mormons were normally not combatant men, and Brigham anticipated objections. "We feel confident," he wrote in another letter, this one to Saints remaining in Nauvoo, "they will have little or no fighting."

It took Brigham three weeks of coaxing, pleading, thundering and wheedling to convince all that the plan was just, that it was the wisest course under the circumstances. It's hard to blame those who were at first reluctant; most would be leaving their families behind, and after nearly three

months of toil across Iowa, three months of incredible suffering and illness, the scheduled forced march to California in the service of an ungrateful government was, after all, something that stretched the limits of even their faith and tolerance.

Orson Pratt summarized their feelings:

Another obstacle soon made its appearance [he wrote in his diary dated July 7], which seemed to completely hedge up our way from going any further this season; it was a call from the general government of the United States, upon the poor, persecuted, exiled Saints, to send 500 men into the service of the army against Mexico. The United States had the barefaced injustice and inhumanity to require of the Saints to go and fight their battles in their invasion of Mexico, after having suffered us to be driven from state to state unlawfully and unconstitutionally, with a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property; and after the martyrdom and cold blooded butchery of scores of our men, women and innocent children.

Yes, after having seen us year after year deprived of the inheritances of our own lands for which we had paid them our money, and after suffering some 30,000 men, women and children, to be driven from their own firesides, to wander houseless and unprotected upon the wild uninhabited prairies of the west—they call upon that same people to leave their wives and children in an Indian country, without food, without house, without friends, and without, to all human appearance, the least prospect of surviving the coming winter. Here, then, under these aggravating circumstances, what kind of a spirit do we find manifested by the Saints?

We find a willingness on their part, to obey the call of that government who had treated them so cruelly. We find them enlisting, and immediately torn from their weeping families, when hunger, starvation and death seemed to be staring them full in the face. But why, it may be asked, did the Saints volunteer under such heartrending circumstances? It was, because it was intimated in case of refusal, that the United States would treat us as enemies, and send an army and cut us off in our journeyings; it was that we might show our loyalty to the laws and constitution of our country which we had ever held dear to our hearts, notwithstanding we had been exiled from all the privileges of American citizenship. It was that we might prove to all the world that we were willing to render good for evil. But humanity blushes while we still further relate the injustice of our nation. For, at the very time when 500 of our men were marching for Mexico, in the United States service, the same United States were suffering an organized army of several thousand strong, to march into the city of Nauvoo, and drive the aged fathers and mothers of these soldiers who were too poor to remove with the main body of the Saints. Yes, to put some of them to death, and force the last remaining remnant to wander over the plains of the west, where many of them perished without house or friends. This is but a faint sketch of the injustice and cruelty inflicted upon an unoffending people—a people who have ever held sacred the laws of their country, and who, rather than violate them would be willing to sacrifice their lives.