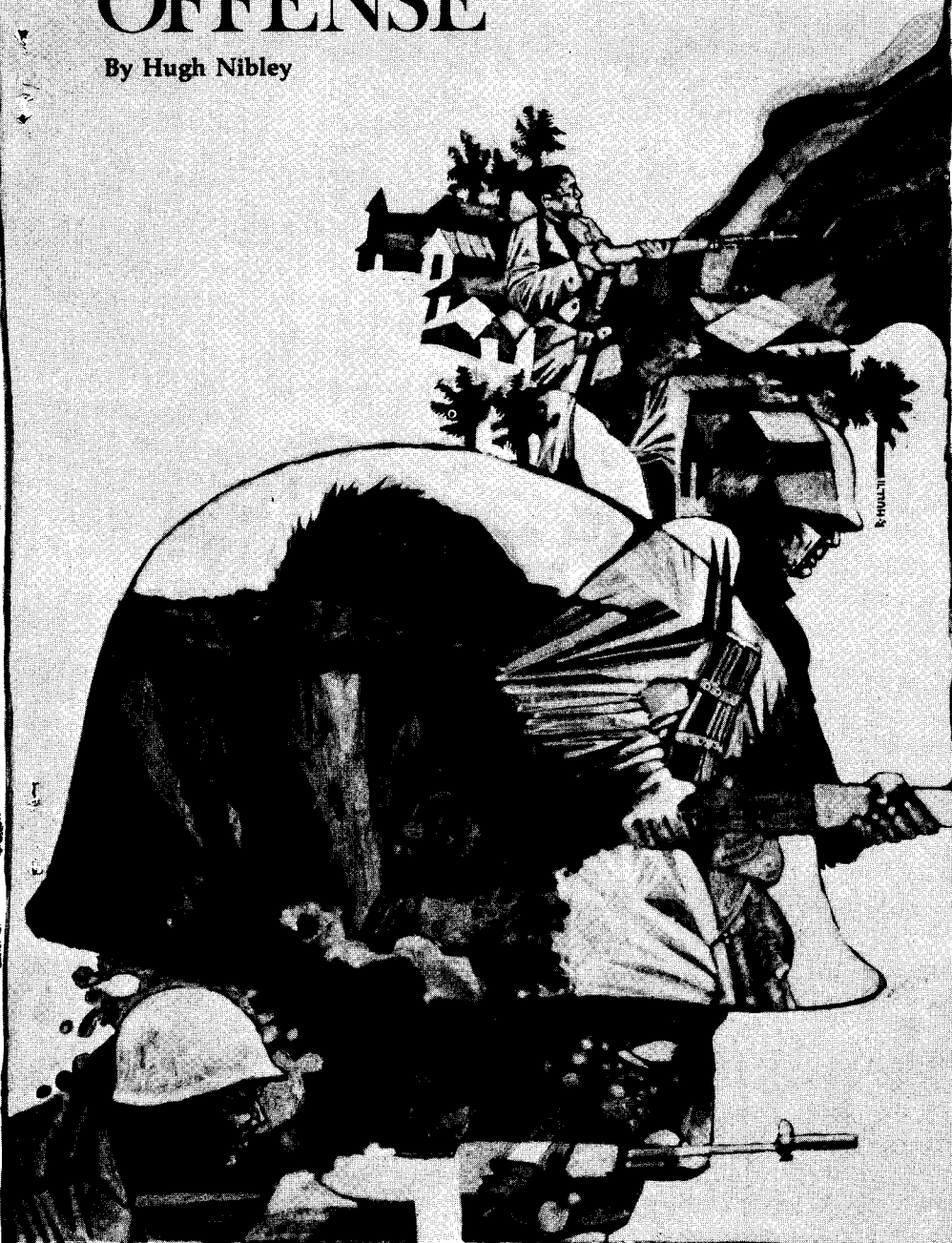# IF THERE MUST NEEDS BE OFFENSE

By Hugh Nibley

It has been a quarter of a century since the end of a war that involved nearly the whole world. And yet there has been no peace since that great tragedy was concluded. Men continue to fight, blood is spilled, lives are lost, and the world totters again on the brink of a massive conflagration.

What are the answers to war and peace for Latter-day Saints? Does the Lord suggest a position to be taken by members of the Church?

The word of prophecy is final: ". . . with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; . . . until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations." (D&C 87:6.) And yet in the same breath in which he declares that God "foresaw that war should come upon all nations," President Joseph F. Smith declared all this warlike activity to be strictly contrary to the will of God, who "is not pleased, nor was it his purpose or design or intent to foreordain the condition [of war] that the world is in today," since wars come "not to fulfil the purposes of God, but the purposes of the nations of the earth in consequence of their wickedness."[1]

With the First Vision it was revealed that the two great events lying ahead for mankind in these last days are the building of Zion and the overthrow of Babylon, two developments working in

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opposite directions and with opposite spirits, excluding compromise. The prophecy on war ends with explicit instructions: "Wherefore, stand ye in holy places, and be not moved, until the day of the Lord come. . . ." (D&C 87:8.)

But until the day of the Lord comes, we live in a wicked world, and to that degree in which we partake of the sins of Babylon, we needs must receive of her plagues. (See Rev. 18:4.) We may not indulge our covetousness in time of peace and fastidiously disdain to share in the discomforts and perils of war. The Saints, by no means immune to the vices of the world, have often had to assume a warlike posture; yet considering the terrible and ceaseless tensions and provocations that surrounded the Church in its early days, and the "wild spirit of ambition" that animated some of its members, "suggesting schemes of blood and empire,"[2] it is a marvel how little fighting was done. The Saints were told time and again to stand still and let God fight their battles, and whenever they obeyed they were always saved. Brigham Young's instructions to the Mormon Battalion tell us how to behave when we are forced to fight:

"I instructed the captains to be fathers to their companies, and manage their affairs by the power and influence of their priesthood, then they would have power to preserve their lives and the lives of their companies and escape difficulties. I told them I would not be afraid to pledge my right hand that every man will return alive, if they will perform their duties faithfully, without murmuring, and go in the name of the Lord. . . . Let no man be without his undergarment, and always wear a coat or vest; keep neat and clean, teach chastity, gentility, and civility; swearing must not be admitted, insult no man; have no contentious conversation with any [type] of people. . . . Should the battalion engage with the enemy and be successful, treat prisoners with the greatest civility, and never take life, if it can be avoided."[3]

When Daniel H. Wells, the commander of the Mormon military army during "Johnston's War," issued written orders, they bore "on the back . . . the usual inscription, 'Shed no blood!' "[4] What a strange way to wage war!

Recently I received from a Brigham Young University professor a list of scriptural passages in which God seemed to favor war; matching it on the other side of the page was another list of passages in which conflict was forbidden. This seems like a deadlock, a basic contradiction. But the contradiction is only apparent, for if one examines the passages on both sides throughout the scriptures, they fall clearly into two categories: general principles and special instances. The verses forbidding conflict are of a general and universal nature, while those which countenance it all refer to exceptional cases. Karl von Clausewitz, the greatest of all students of war, says it is all-important in making war to distinguish between the general principles, which always apply, and the special instances and exceptions, which are dictated by expediency and are never exactly the same twice. It is dangerous and foolish, he says, to lay down rules based on inference from special cases.[5]

The same applies to the scriptures. It is human nature to search out of the scriptures special cases to justify whatever one wants to do; this belongs to what President Joseph F. Smith calls the dangerous indulging of "religious hobbies."[6] For example, Nephi beheaded a helpless man, a general in his country's employ; but he takes great pains to explain that this was a special case, a painful episode in which he acted only with the greatest reluctance. I may not appeal to this instance, therefore, as justifying the murder of any government official whom I find obnoxious. On the other hand, when Nephi cries out, "Why am I angry because of mine enemy?" (2 Ne. 4:27), he is proclaiming the universal principle that it is wrong to be angry—even with an enemy.[7] When Mormon reports that the Nephites lost their last campaign because they "went up unto the Lamanites," he is reviewing a particular case—there *may* be times when offensive action is indicated in war.

One can easily distinguish between general principles and special exceptions because the former are stated in general terms and as direct commands of God: "Thou shalt not kill." "Man shall not smite, neither shall he judge." "Cursed is he that puts his trust in the arm of flesh." "We believe in doing good to *all* men." "Contention is not of me but of the devil." "Blessed are the peacemakers." "It is the wicked who stir up the hearts of the children of men to bloodshed." "Love thine enemy." "Nought but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne." Such statements allow of no qualification or modification.

True, there are times when one is forced to drive through a red light in order to avoid disaster or save a life, but such exceptions do not for a moment abrogate the rule against driving through red lights— the law remains in full force, even when it is broken. Even when God recognizes extenuating circumstances, he still gives us a choice, with precedence going always to the general rule. Thus, in Doctrine and Covenants 98 he allows us to fight our enemies under *very special* circumstances; i.e., after

they have attacked us and been warned by us three times, they may be repulsed the fourth time. Yet even here, while God acknowledges "I have delivered thine enemy unto thine hands" (v. 29), he promises a special blessing if we do *not* choose to take advantage of our option: ". . . *then* if thou wilt spare him, thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness" (v. 30); and if the fourth time he still does not repent, but you choose to forgive him, "I the Lord will avenge thee of thine enemy an hundredfold" (v. 45)—his own mighty intervention rewards our forbearance.

The main thing, of course, is the spirit in which things are done. We have Mormon both sparing his enemies every time he gets a chance *and* putting down a coalition by force of arms with some bloodshed. But there is no doubt in the world which course he would prefer. Though they fought a duel, David and Goliath were *not* animated by the same spirit. And why did the first Moroni (about 63 B.C.) give the attitude that he "did not delight in the shedding of blood"? (Al. 55:19.) Because there are people who do delight in it. There were such men even around Joseph Smith, and they were a grief to his soul: "When you find a spirit that wants bloodshed —murder," he said, "the same is not of God but of the devil."[8] In the movie *Patton*, that general on a corpse-strewn and stinking field says, "I love it! God forgive me, but I love it!" He delighted in bloodshed—and knew it was wrong, even in wartime. The popularity of that film is a reminder that the Nephites acquired their fatal appetite for bloodshed in a very short time: "And only a few years have passed away, and they were a civil and delightsome people." In the course of one long war they become "without principle and past

feeling; . . . without order and without mercy . . . they have lost their love, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually." (Moro. 9:12, 20, 18, 5.)

Nothing is easier, Clausewitz notes, than to justify bloodshed. One Latter-day Saint correspondent writes to me that First Samuel 15:2-3 is proof that Christ commands a scorched-earth policy for us, and that Matthew 10:34 is proof that "Christ . . . advocated war within families." The first instance is a very special case, unique in history; in the second an ambiguous English translation confuses a result-clause (the plain statement of fact that the preaching of the gospel divides families) with a purpose-clause (that Christ came with the express wish and purpose to destroy families); and so a determined exegesis can twist this one verse into making the Prince of Peace an author of contention. Such an act is a clear demonstration not of logic or philology but of the spirit.

Men have even used the expulsion of Satan from heaven— "the peaceable kingdom"— "thrust down in a twinkling," for resorting to violence, as an argument that violence is the order of heaven. There is no limit to the acts of depravity that might be justified and sanctified by appeal to specific instances in scripture. It is best to allow no latitude whatever to individual interpretation, with its easy rationalizations and sophistries, as long as we have an abundance of clear and specific statements of just what pleases and displeases our Heavenly Father. (Read Moses 7:29-34.) It is significant that Mormon did not for a moment condone the Nephite search for blood and vengeance because it was directed against the Lamanites; it did not mitigate the shedding of blood for him because

it was Lamanite blood that was being shed.

Clausewitz describes the motivating forces and objectives of war and the means by which they are achieved and the spirit in which war must be undertaken (this he considers the most important of all) with that devastating honesty that has made him the prince of military analysts. The same list may be found, exactly reversed, setting forth in the Doctrine and Covenants the nature of that power by which God operates, by which the worlds are created and sustained.

Admittedly we are faced with grim situations—these are not called the last days for nothing! How we react to these situations is part of the test we undergo in this time of probation. In the darkest period of the history of the Church, when the Saints were nearer than they ever were before or after to extermination by force of arms, Joseph Smith appeared to Brigham Young in a dream with the instructions that alone could save them: "Tell the brethren to get the Spirit of the Lord," he said three times and with great emphasis. "They can tell the Spirit of the Lord from all other spirits; it will whisper peace and joy to their souls; it will take malice, hatred, strife and all evil from their hearts."[9]

In the end the most desperate military situation imaginable is still to be met with the spirit of peace and love. ■

[1]Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (course of study for the Melchizedek Priesthood quorums, 1970-71), vol. 1, p. 131.

[2]*Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, January 25, 1845.

[3]Ibid., July 7, 1846, pp. 86-87.

[4]*Deseret News*, May 23, 1877.

[5]Karl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics, and Power*, ed. Col. E. M. Collins (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1962), pp. 38f, 50-59.

[6]Joseph F. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-64.

[7]Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book Co., 1938), p. 358; King Follett Discourse.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Young, *op. cit.*, February 24, 1847, p. 57.