A few days before Christmas 1832, Latter-day Saints in Kirtland came in from the cold, damp air to sit by the light of their warm, flickering fires. They opened up their local paper, the Painesville Telegraph, to find alarming news. Seven hundred miles to the south, the legislature of South Carolina, a state within the United States, had declared “null and void” taxes placed on imported goods by the federal government. This move created a “nullification crisis” that challenged the right of the federal government to enforce its own laws. War loomed on the horizon.1

These tariffs had been established to protect northern manufacturers from foreign competition. Southern farmers found them unfair. Why should they pay more for goods their region did not produce?2 Andrew Jackson, the president of the United States, issued a proclamation in which he warned that South Carolina’s rejection of federal tariffs was an act of rebellion that could end in bloodshed. South Carolina promptly responded by preparing for war.3 Compromise seemed nowhere in sight. The accounts read by Kirtland residents sounded the war drum: “Let one menacing Federal bayonet glitter upon our borders,” one account read, and it will be a “war of sovereigns.”4

Joseph Smith followed this conflict closely through the newspapers that passed into Kirtland. He appended a note in his history about the people of South Carolina “declaring their state, a free and Independent Nation” and the “proclamation against this rebellion” given by President Jackson.5 And then, following these lines, Joseph inserted what he called “a prophecy on war,” a revelation he dictated to his clerk Frederick G. Williams on Christmas Day 1832, just days after the startling news appeared in the Kirtland papers. That revelation is known today as Doctrine and Covenants 87.

Without ever mentioning President Jackson by name, the prophecy on war made the president’s conditional promises inevitable. President Jackson had predicted that armed conflict would result if South Carolina continued to insist on its own sovereignty. According to President Jackson, South Carolina had said through its actions: “Peace and prosperity we will deface; this free intercourse we will interrupt; these fertile fields we will deluge with blood.”6 Yet, if South Carolina backed down, the deluge could be avoided. In Joseph Smith’s prophecy, however, bloodshed was a foregone conclusion. “The wars that will shortly come to pass beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina,” the revelation said, “will eventually terminate in the death and misery of many souls.”7 The revelation foreshadowed no peaceful resolution.

Destruction was not a new theme in Joseph Smith’s revelations. The Lord had already warned of a time when famine, pestilence, and tempests would befall the world’s inhabitants.8 The revelations taught that widespread destruction would precede the Lord’s Second Coming, and the frequency of references to destruction in the revelations prompted many Latter-day Saints to conclude that the Second Coming must be imminent.9

Doctrine and Covenants 87 only heightened expectations that the Second Coming was not far away. Other revelations located destruction in an indeterminate
time and place: Destruction would happen “before this great day,” referring to the Second Coming, or would occur among “all nations.”10 War and rumors of war would be “in your own lands,” the revelations said, and “in foreign lands.”11 Doctrine and Covenants 87, by contrast, tied destruction to specific places and events in a contemporary landscape: South Carolina and its rebellion were singled out by name. Conflict involved more than just warring nations. It would also involve oppressed groups—“slaves” and “remnants”—rising up against their masters and overseers.12

The reference to slaves inserted Doctrine and Covenants 87 directly into the conflict over federal power. In the run-up to the crisis, South Carolinians had argued that the federal tariffs were intentionally designed to subvert the slave-labor farming economy that dominated the American South. States that stood to benefit from the tariffs, including Ohio, had all made slavery illegal. Joseph Smith’s prophecy on war recognized these geopolitical rifts and tied them to the wars inevitably to follow: “The Southern States shall be divided against the Northern States, and the Southern States will call on other nations, even the nation of Great Britain.”13 In 1832, Europe depended on southern cotton for its textile industries. Great Britain seemed a likely ally for South Carolina’s cause.

Crisis Averted

To the great surprise of all, the nullification crisis ended almost before it began. In February 1833, President Jackson orchestrated a lowered, compromise tariff, asserting the rights of the federal government while satisfying the demands of states-rights secessionists. Crisis was averted, peace had returned to the land, and President Jackson basked in what may have been his greatest triumph as president.14

The peaceful resolution of the crisis pleased everyone but the most ardent firebrands. As a follower of Christ, Joseph Smith loved peace and welcomed compromise, and he looked forward to the return of the Prince of Peace and His peaceful millennial reign. But the dire predictions contained in the prophecy on war, tied as they were to contemporary events, must have puzzled Joseph. The death and misery of many souls did not occur. The Southern states continued to be divided against the North over the question of slavery, but the slaves did not rise up against their masters, and South Carolina did not call on Great Britain for help.15 Anyone looking for the fulfillment of the revelation in 1833 would have been disappointed.

Joseph Smith seemed reluctant to spread news of his prophecy on war too widely. Even before the crisis had been averted, he told a newspaper editor that he was sure “not many years shall pass away before the United States shall present such a scene of bloodshed as has not a parallel in the history of our nation.”16 But he did not get any more specific than that. He did not mention South Carolina in his later teachings and sermons. When he compiled his revelations for publication in 1835, Joseph withheld Doctrine and Covenants 87 from the collection. After the nullification crisis ended peacefully, it seemed best to set the revelation aside during his lifetime.17

Joseph was sure of his prior revelations. He had felt the voice of God speak through him before and had seen those words come to pass. He must have wondered if this revelation was a case of false prophecy. Or, if the prophecy was true, what would God have Joseph do now that peace, even if temporary, had been achieved?
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Holy Places

Doctrine and Covenants 87 did not radically reorient Joseph Smith’s approach to life. He did not hide in a bunker or otherwise drop out from public view, waiting for the end. Even before President Jackson’s successful resolution of the crisis, when war still looked likely, Joseph quietly opened a school for elders who would soon go out into the world as missionaries. The School of the Prophets, as Joseph called it, met with a small group of Latter-day Saint men in the Newel K. Whitney storehouse in Kirtland.

In the school, Joseph taught students how to “speak in the name of God.” He encouraged the men to purify themselves so that God’s Spirit could help them find and teach the elect. Those who kept the Word of Wisdom, Joseph taught, would run and not be weary and walk and not faint. President Jackson had sought to avert destruction through diplomacy. Joseph taught that the “destroying angel” could be avoided through righteous living.

Joseph never shied away from warning the world of the cataclysms to come. But that was not the point of his message. He was not a doomsayer prophet, content with predicting only misery and woe. At the end of Doctrine and Covenants 87, the Lord told the Saints how to respond to such troubling prophecies. They were not to live in fear or abandon their current endeavors. They were to “stand . . . in holy places and be not moved.”

A few days after Doctrine and Covenants 87 was received, Joseph Smith received another revelation, in which the Lord commanded the Saints to build a temple in Kirtland (Doctrine and Covenants 88). This revelation, like the prophecy on war, spoke of the destructions to come. Yet it also spoke of an important work the Saints were to perform. They were not to sit passively, awaiting Christ’s return while the world fell apart all around them. Nor were they simply to preach, as the doomsayers did. They were to build new structures, new institutions, new “holy places.” Always obedient to his revelations, Joseph opened the School of the Prophets, as the revelation enjoined him to do. Later that summer he would break ground for the temple.

Down to the end of Joseph’s life, it would be the “holy places,” temples and schools, that would most capture his attention. Experience taught him to put little faith in the power of diplomacy, as Andrew Jackson did. Joseph knew from the all-too-frequent moves the Saints were forced to undertake how tenuous peace could be. Despite the conflict that surrounded them, the Saints could always find peace in the process of creating and inhabiting holy places.

Conclusion

Three decades after Doctrine and Covenants 87 was received, South Carolina rebelled again. Convinced that Abraham Lincoln’s election as U.S. president spelled trouble for the institution of slavery, the state legislature voted to secede from the United States. South Carolina’s move triggered a war between North and South. Much death and misery resulted. Southerners called on Great Britain for help. Slaves rose up against their masters. All the while, the Saints, now in their new mountain home in the West, toiled away on the foundations of yet another holy place—the Salt Lake Temple.

Author: Jed Woodworth, April 28, 2016

Footnotes
1. See William W. Freehling, ed., The Nullification Era: A Documentary Record (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967). The news of South Carolina’s rebellion against federal tariffs had been reported before this time, but not until December 21 did the Painesville Telegraph report the speech of the governor of South Carolina supporting the actions of the legislature.
2. The U.S. Constitution gave the federal government power to regulate commerce, and for the first two decades of the country’s existence, tariffs were set low in order to stimulate revenue. The higher tariff rates came in response to the large-scale British manufacturing of the 1810s and ’20s (see Paul P. Abrahams, “Tariffs,” in Paul S. Boyer, ed., The Oxford Companion to United States History [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 761).
3. Andrew Jackson, Proclamation, Dec. 10, 1832, in James D. Richardson, comp., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 11 vols. (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 3:1203–19. The South Carolina legislature authorized $200,000—an enormous sum—for munitions and gave its governor authority to call out the militia (see Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democ-
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Proponents of nullification naturally greeted President Jackson's proclamation with contempt, viewing it as a means of intimidating South Carolina Whigs into submission by fomenting the opponents of nullification within the state. For these radical nullifiers, President Jackson's proclamation amounted to a "declaration of war" ("South Carolina," Alexandria [Virginia] Gazette, Dec. 25, 1832, 2).

4 "The Charleston Mercury," Painesville Telegraph, Dec. 21, 1832, 3, column 2. James Hamilton, the outgoing governor of South Carolina, seemed almost to invite war in a widely reported speech given on December 10. "A large majority of our people," he said, "would rather have every house on the surface of our Territory razed to the ground, and every blade of grass burnt, than surrender to the despotism and injustice of that system of Government against which we have unalterably taken our stand" ("South Carolina," American Traveller [Boston], Dec. 25, 1832, 3).


6 Richardson, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 3:1217.

7 "Revelation, 25 December 1832 [D&C 87]," in Revelation Book 2, 32, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 87:1.

8 See "Revelation, September 1830–A [D&C 29]," in Revelation Book 1, 37–38, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 29:14–19.


10 "Revelation, September 1830–A [D&C 29]," 37; "Revelation, 4 November 1830 [D&C 34]," in Revelation Book 1, 46, josephsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 29:14; 34:8–9.

11 "Revelation, circa 7 March 1831 [D&C 45]," in Revelation Book 1, 73, 75; see also Doctrine and Covenants 45:26, 63.

12 "Revelation, 25 December 1832 [D&C 87]," 32–33; see also Doctrine and Covenants 87:1.

13 "Revelation, 25 December 1832 [D&C 87]," 33; capitalization and punctuation modernized; see also Doctrine and Covenants 87:3.

14 Merrill D. Peterson, Olive Branch and Sword—The Compromise of 1833 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836 (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 293. Scholars are divided on President Jackson's handling of the nullification crisis. Older scholarship tends to be more laudatory and celebratory, but more recent scholars have argued that compromise constituted a serious embarrassment that hurt President Jackson politically in the years to come (see Richard E. Ellis, The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987], 181–82).

15 Slave rebellions had occurred prior to 1832, but they tended to be isolated and short-lived events. See, for example, Stephen B. Oates, The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

16 Joseph Smith letter to Noah C. Saxton, Jan. 4, 1833, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, 17–18, josephsmithpapers.org; spelling modernized.

17 Although missionaries had carried handwritten copies of the revelation for decades, it was not published until 1851 (see Scott C. Esplin, “Have We Not Had a Prophet among Us?: Joseph Smith's Civil War Prophecy,” in Civil War Saints, ed. Kenneth L. Alford [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012], 41–59).

18 "Revelation, 1 November 1831–B [D&C 1]," in Revelation Book 1, 126, josephsmithpapers.org; see also "Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126]," in Revelation Book 2, 46, josephsmithpapers.org; Doctrine and Covenants 1:20; 88:122.


20 "Revelation, 27 February 1833 [D&C 89]," in Revelation Book 2, 51, josephsmithpapers.org; spelling modernized; see also D&C 89:21.


22 "Revelation, 25 December 1832 [D&C 87]," 33; see also Doctrine and Covenants 87:8.