



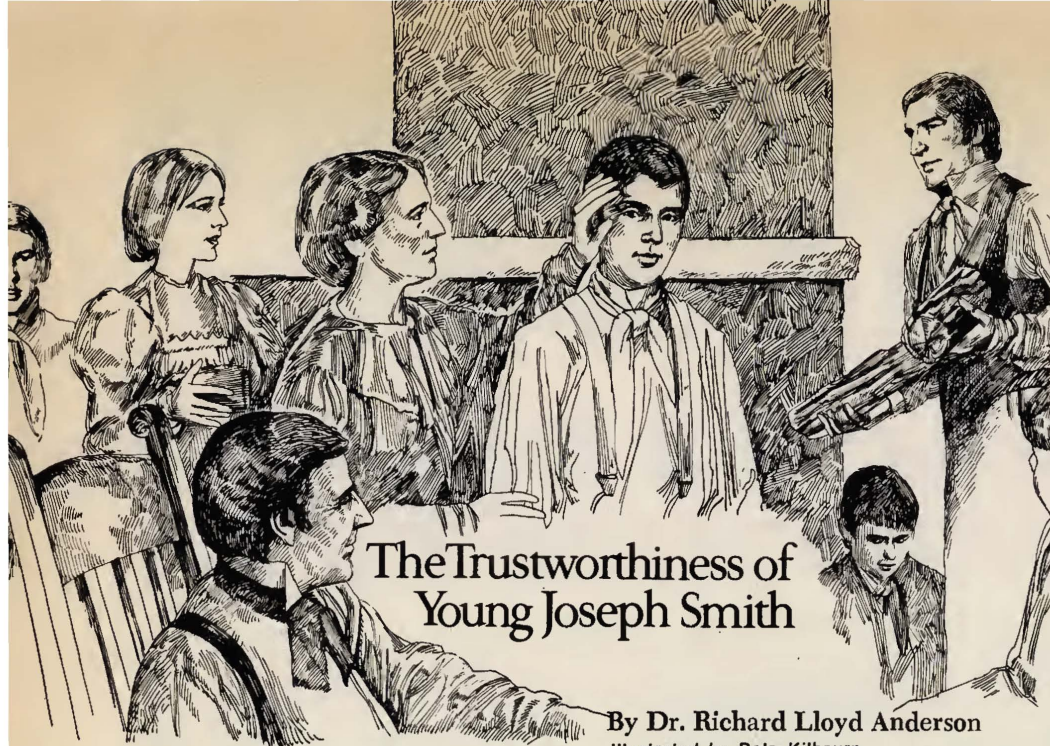
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The Trustworthiness of Young Joseph Smith

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The Trustworthiness of Young Joseph Smith

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson
Illustrated by Dale Kilbourn

● Two parents, five brothers, and three sisters of the Prophet Joseph Smith were living at the time of the coming of Moroni, and each became a devout believer in the reality of the revelations. They comprise a virtual jury qualified to evaluate the consistency of Joseph's early story and his personal believability in telling it. Without dissent, these eleven gave total acceptance.

The first person to believe in the angel's coming was the Prophet's father. The Prophet went to the field the morning after the triple vision of instruction, but physical exhaustion prevented his working. As he was leaving the field, the angel appeared to reiterate his message, "and commanded me to go to my father and tell him of the vision and commandments which I had received."¹ Lucy Mack Smith added a detail likely to have been remembered by a parent—that the angel was actually requesting an explanation for Joseph's not following prior instructions to report the visions to his father. Joseph's answer was that he feared his father's skepticism; however, "the angel rejoined, 'He will believe every word you say to him.'"² One manuscript account adds vividness to the event. In an

1835 conversation, the Prophet recalled the moment when he first informed his father of the angel's visit: "The old man wept, and told me that it was a vision from God, and to attend it."³

Joseph Smith, Sr., was the patriarch of his family, and in at least one family gathering voiced for all a complete faith in his son's visions. In 1834 the Smith family and a few Church leaders gathered to receive their blessings from Joseph Smith, Sr., the appointed Patriarch to the Church. In an informal service preceding this semi-private meeting, the Prophet's father reviewed the "many afflictions" of the family, including some deaths, particularly that of the beloved Alvin, "taken from us in the vigor of life, in the bloom of youth."⁴ The Patriarch was expressing the intimate feelings of his entire family.

His remarks were followed by prayer and then the initial blessing, given to Joseph Smith, Jr. The opening words reviewed the experiences now accepted by the family that had known the Prophet from boyhood: "The Lord thy God has called thee by name out of the heavens; thou hast heard his voice from on high from time to time, even in thy youth."⁵

The process by which this family acquired such profound conviction can be reconstructed through the detailed writings of the mother and younger brother of the Prophet. These two present significantly different points of view. Certainly no one knew Joseph Smith, Jr., more intimately than his mother. But for all of her faith in God and the calling of her son, she resists the temptation to glorify his every act. For instance, she begins her story of the early visions with the admission that she had told little about the youth of the Prophet. "Some of my readers will be disappointed," she acknowledges, since leading questions had been repeatedly put to her about supposed "remarkable incidents" of his childhood: "but, as nothing occurred during his early life except those trivial circumstances which are common to that state of human existence, I pass them in silence."⁶ Such realism argues well for Lucy Mack Smith's honesty in the remaining record of her son.

The memoirs of William Smith nicely supplement those of the mother. One sees Joseph Smith through very feminine, the other through very masculine eyes. Moreover, the confidence of the mother is balanced by the more detached point of view of the brother. In this case, the brother is the most spiritually skeptical of all of the Smith family. His later religious history proves a lifelong rebelliousness, tempered only by older years.

At the time of Joseph Smith's visions, Hyrum and Samuel H. Smith had followed their mother into the Presbyterian Church, while most other family members were religious yet aloof from organized religion. William, however, describes himself as not even religious. Family worship "often became irksome or tiresome to me," he writes

of this early period; he paid "no attention to religion of any kind. . . ." Only a powerful experience could unite this religiously divided family, and Lucy Mack Smith and William represented opposite poles.

Carelessly quoting William Smith is an irresponsible procedure. He published rather detailed recollections of his youth in 1883.⁷ He also wrote detailed comments on the published stories about the Prophet about 1875.⁸ Besides this, access to William's memory is gained mainly through an interview of 1841,⁹ a speech of 1884,¹⁰ and an interview of 1893.¹¹ These five basic sources for William Smith show a historical method that resembles his religious career, spontaneous and not highly organized. Sequence is not as important to him as making his point with a random illustration. One must be aware of these characteristics because he does not relate the first vision of his brother. That is understandable, first of all, because he was barely nine when it took place. Furthermore, speaking of later visions, he indicated firm belief but carelessness: "being young and naturally high-spirited, I did not realize the importance of such things as I should have done. . . ."¹² Memory depends on deep interest. William, therefore, writes impressionistic history, recalling accurately his basic feelings of a time while often only approximating details. In this matter, he is his own best critic, for more than once he alerts the reader that Joseph Smith's story is more precise than his own: "A more elaborate and accurate description of his vision, however, will be found in his own history."¹³

Through the recollections of Lucy Mack and William Smith, the clock can be turned back to the day when Joseph announced Moroni's coming to the family. As discussed, the stripping prophet first confided

this news to his father in the field. Of course, Lucy Smith was not there, but from family knowledge she reported that on that morning Alvin noticed an unusual slackness in Joseph's work and that "Joseph was very pale."¹⁴ William confirmed this episode from firsthand knowledge: "I was at work in the field together with Joseph and my eldest brother Alvin. Joseph looked pale and unwell. . . ."¹⁵

The most dramatic moment that day for the family circle was Joseph's narration to them of his visions of the night before. William places this event prior to Joseph's going to the hill, and Mother Smith afterwards. Yet both could be right. Possibly Joseph gave an announcement before and a detailed report afterwards. As to the family's reaction, there is no doubt. Lucy Mack Smith describes the intense interest of Alvin and "the most profound attention" of the entire family at Joseph's first reports of what had happened to him. William also described the family's reaction to Joseph's explanations: "They were astounded, but not altogether incredulous."¹⁶

The foregoing words are those of an interested professor of church history who talked at length with William in 1841. Later William specifically described the reaction of the Smiths when Joseph told them of Moroni's coming:

"[H]e arose and told us how the angel appeared to him, what he had told him. . . . He continued talking to us [for] sometime. The whole family were melted to tears, and believed all he said. Knowing that he was very young, that he had not enjoyed the advantages of a common education; and knowing too, his whole character and disposition, they were convinced that he was totally incapable of arising before his aged parents, his brothers and sisters, and so solemnly giving



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utterance to anything but the truth."¹⁷ In this comment William singled out reasons for the implicit trust of the household in the nearly 18-year-old Joseph: his limited education, and "his whole character and disposition." There are important historical insights on these points that enable one to see young Joseph Smith through the eyes of his day-to-day companions.

First of all, it came as a shock that the teenager thought himself capable of writing a book. One autobiographical sketch summarizes his total education in one terse sentence: "My father was a farmer and taught me the art of husbandry."¹⁸ That is to say, muscle and tools were his skills, not study and books. Although not illiterate, Joseph at this point of life was relatively unskilled in reading and writing. One contemporary at Palmyra pays him the compliment of showing native intelligence in the "juvenile debating club,"¹⁹ but it is a long leap from that to gaining either the interest or capacity to reproduce scripture.

Joseph himself commented on the demands of life that prevented his doing much reading. He mentioned the "indigent circumstances" of the family, and the necessity "to labor hard" to support the dozen members alive in 1823. This "required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the family; therefore, we were deprived of the benefit of an education. Suffice it to say, I was merely instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic, which constituted my whole literary acquisitions."²⁰

William and Lucy Smith concur. The former pictures his brother as educated only in a rudimentary way: "That he was illiterate to some extent is admitted, but that he was entirely unlettered is a mistake. In syntax, orthography, mathematics,

grammar, geography, with other studies in the common schools of his day, he was no novice, and for writing, he wrote a plain, intelligible hand."²¹ In other words, Joseph had taken advantage of limited opportunities for basic education, but (as his mother insists) he was anything but widely read: at 18 he "had never read the Bible through in his life. He seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children, but far more given to meditation and deep study."²² The Smith family measured the adolescent Joseph and found it unbelievable that he would know history or aspire to writing it down without the divine direction that he claimed.

If formal education was subordinate to survival, it was the latter that fashioned the personalities of the men of the Smith family. Here Alvin's known dutifulness reveals the similarly conditioned traits of the older sons—and Alvin's dutifulness was also a profound influence on Joseph. The Prophet had loved and identified with his oldest brother. Visiting his sister Katherine 20 years after Alvin's death, he recalled the use of his brother's physical prowess in defending an underdog: when one Irishman sought to gouge out another's eyes in a fight, "Alvin took him by his collar and breeches and threw him over the ring, which had been formed to witness the fight."²³

To love Alvin was to love his capacity for obedience: "I remember well the pangs of sorrow that swelled my youthful bosom and almost burst my tender heart when he died. He was the oldest and the noblest of my father's family. . . . In him there was no guile. He lived without spot from the time he was a child. From the time of his birth he never knew mirth. He was candid and sober and never would play, and minded his father and

mother in toiling all day. . . ."²⁴

An untimely death came to Alvin in 1823. His mother recounts the deathbed drama, as he exhorted his mature brothers to the responsibility that he had shouldered all of his life. He also encouraged his brother Joseph to be obedient to the revelations of the angel. It is impressive that such a strong personality as Alvin believed in Joseph's revelations implicitly. It is also impressive that he considered Joseph an obedient person. Obviously a great measure of Alvin's seriousness about life was also found in the personality of his prophet-brother. William writes: "I was quite wild and inconsiderate, paying no attention to religion of any kind, for which I received frequent lectures from my mother and my brother Joseph."²⁵

His mother gives this same picture of Joseph. Late in life she summarized her achievement of raising a half-dozen boys and observed, "never was there a more obedient family."²⁶ This is known to be true of the cluster of older brothers that surrounded Joseph. Alvin, about seven years Joseph's senior, "was a youth of singular goodness of disposition—kind and amiable. . . ."²⁷ Hyrum, older than Joseph by some six years, was "remarkable for his tenderness and sympathy" and consistently was "a good, trusty boy."²⁸ Samuel, some two years younger than Joseph, "always performed his missions faithfully,"²⁹ whether in the Church or in the Smith household. These characterizations of her sons by Lucy Mack Smith harmonize completely with their personalities in later life.³⁰ His mother said that Joseph, a product of the same environment, was "a remarkably quiet, well-disposed child."³¹

The responsibilities that molded these elder Smith brothers were alluded to by the younger William.



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He summed up the economic challenge of moving on to forested land and the result obtained within seven years: "While there we cleared a large farm, built a house, planted an orchard, and had commenced living in more comfortable circumstances."³² The details are impressive. "We cleared sixty acres of the heaviest timber I ever saw,"³³ this work "in about five years."³⁴ "Some of the elms were . . . too large to be cut with a cross-cut saw."³⁵ After cutting, the wood was gathered for burning: if anyone "had wanted to see Joseph at that time and remained very long, he would have had to be in the field rolling logs or carrying brush."³⁶ On the place there were "from twelve to fifteen hundred sugar trees, and to gather the sap and make sugar and molasses from that number of trees was no lazy job."³⁷ Originally, their land did not even have a dwelling on it: "The improvements made on this farm [were] first commenced by building a log house at no small expense, and at a later date a frame house at a cost of several hundred dollars,"³⁸ a cash outlay in scarce dollars after the 1820 depression. A "good fence" around 60 acres was also built, and "outbuildings, etc."³⁹ In addition to their own taxing work, the older sons constantly hired out: "Whenever the neighbors wanted a good day's work done, they knew where they could get a good hand, and they were not particular to take any of the other boys before Joseph, either."⁴⁰ In all the labor described above, "Joseph did his share of the work with the rest of the boys."⁴¹ Over years of trying conditions, the Smith family knew Joseph as personally dependable, no small test in a frontier society. This is the objective background for William's view that Joseph's "whole character and disposition" compelled all the

family to believe in his visions.

One episode from the Prophet's youth brings his basic nature into sharp focus. This is his painful bone extraction without anesthesia in late childhood, known ordinarily from Lucy Mack Smith's published account of it, but also recorded in fair detail in a Nauvoo manuscript note by the Prophet. Before observing Joseph's heroism in that ordeal, it is necessary to discuss some background of that event. All of the Smith children had been born in Vermont up to and including William, whose birthdate there is March 13, 1811. Then Lucy Mack Smith says that the family moved during 1811 to Lebanon, New Hampshire, where Katherine was born July 8, 1812.⁴²

While at Lebanon Joseph Smith's operation took place. An approximate date is possible because this surgery was preceded by an epidemic that threatened the lives of several of the Smith children. As Mother Smith says, "The typhus fever came into Lebanon, and raged tremendously."⁴³ Joseph remembered being cared for in this period by Dr. Smith, of nearby Hanover. This dates the epidemic, for Dr. Nathan Smith moved from Dartmouth College to Yale University in the fall of 1813.⁴⁴ Furthermore, writing his medical memoirs in 1831, he remembered a typhus epidemic at the time: "In the autumn of 1812, Professor Perkins, now of New York, and myself, attended between fifty and sixty cases of typhus in the vicinity of Dartmouth College. . . ."⁴⁵ Joseph's leg infection followed the epidemic, so it is highly probable that his operation took place in the winter of 1812-1813. This means that we are studying the reactions of a boy seven years of age.

The "typhus" of that epidemic would now be typhoid, complications after which may affect bone

tissue in the manner indicated by Lucy and Joseph Smith. Both recount the infectious pain and its intensification in his leg, but Joseph gives the more objective, summary account:

"And I endured the most acute suffering for a long time, under the care of Drs. Smith, Stone, and Perkins, of Hanover. At one time eleven doctors came from Dartmouth Medical College, at Hanover, New Hampshire, for the purpose of amputation, but, young as I was, I utterly refused to give my assent to the operation, but consented to their trying an experiment by removing a large portion of the bone from my left leg, which they did. And fourteen additional pieces of bone afterwards worked out before my leg healed, during which time I was reduced so very low that my mother could carry me with ease. And after I began to get about, I went on crutches till I started for the state of New York. . . ."46

After 30 years, Joseph Smith recalled his basic facts correctly. Doctors Smith and Perkins did practice jointly in Hanover and were on the Dartmouth medical faculty. The "eleven doctors" were undoubtedly medical students—some 18 graduated in the class of 1813. Dr. Smith was famed for his skill as a surgeon in such cases. In fact, accounts of his operations and the recollections of Joseph and Lucy Smith precisely agree. More might be said of all this; the question at hand, however, concerns the insight that the incident gives into the character of young Joseph Smith.

The first significant point concerns what Joseph Smith did *not* say about himself. Spare of words and terse on his own suffering, he treats his own experience without exaggeration. Such a fact has obvious implications for assessing

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whether his supernatural experiences might be believed. His mother's account moves to the level of personal details of the operation. Following known practices, the boy was offered liquor for pain. At that solemn moment he avoided what many religious people then branded evil. Likewise, he opposed orders that he be bound. Preserving physical liberty, he insisted that he could best endure pain in the arms of his trusted father. Sensitive to his mother's feelings, the boy requested that she leave the room. Lucy vividly remembered that moment: "Then looking up into my face, his eyes swimming in tears, he continued, 'Now mother, promise me that you will not stay, will you? The Lord will help me, and I shall get through with it.'⁴⁷ The necessarily brutal incision and forcible bone removal brought screams of pain, but the first time his mother entered the room, young Joseph recovered enough composure to direct her to leave: "I will try to tough it out, if you will go away."⁴⁸

Courage is first cousin to responsibility and is superbly shown by Joseph Smith as the child verged upon preadolescent accountability.⁴⁹ What appears clearly is total trust in his parents, acute empathy with loved ones, and the power of a personality that knew how to submit to reality. In this single pre-vision episode, one can see qualities that made Joseph's first testimony believable.

In the light of the known character of young Joseph Smith, the family's complete trust of him is a striking fact. William Smith repeatedly told of the angel's coming, with emphasis on the acceptance of that story by his household: "[T]here was not a single member of the family of sufficient age to know right from wrong but what had implicit confidence in the

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statements made by my brother Joseph concerning his vision, and the knowledge he thereby obtained concerning the plates."⁵⁰

No serious question can be raised concerning the sincerity of the Smiths, for they sacrificed reputation and safety by upholding Joseph's testimony. Consequently, their impressions of young Joseph are a major historical tool. They knew the young Prophet intimately; they saw his expressions while relating his visions, and they judged his sincerity. They are a critical means of standing close to Joseph's visions and judging their validity.

It is hard to dismiss the common-sense judgments of the practical brother of the Prophet: "All believed it was true: father, mother, brothers, and sisters. You can tell

what a child is. Parents know whether their children are truthful or not."⁵¹

In his last known interview William Smith drove that point home, in answer to the question of whether the Smiths did not occasionally doubt Joseph's testimony: "No. We all had the most implicit confidence in what he said. He was a truthful boy. Father and mother believed him. Why should not the children? I suppose if he had told crooked stories about other things, we might have doubted his word about the plates, but Joseph was a truthful boy. That father and mother believed his report and suffered persecution for that belief shows that he was truthful. No sir, we never doubted his word for one minute."⁵² ○

FOOTNOTES

¹Joseph Smith 2:49. Modifications in quotations in this article are confined to spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

²Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 82.

³Manuscript History of the Church, Bk. A-1, pp. 121-22, November 9, 1835.

⁴Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, December 9, 1834.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Lucy Mack Smith, p. 73.

⁷William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa, 1883). The latter quotation above on William's lack of religion is at page 10.

⁸William Smith, Notes Written on Chamber's *Miscellany*. For convenience, the highly accurate Church Historian's typescript page numbers will be cited. For details on this manuscript, see Richard L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 10 (Spring 1970), pp. 312-13. The earlier quotation above on William's lack of religion is at page 18.

⁹James Murdock, "Origin of the Mormons," New Haven, Connecticut, June 19, 1841, in *Peoria Register and North-Western Gazetteer*, September 3, 1841, hereafter cited as Murdock Interview. No copies of the original *Hartford Observer* article are known. Murdock, who interviewed William Smith, was a major American church historian.

¹⁰"The Old Soldier's Testimony," speech at Deloit, Iowa, June 8, 1884, *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 31 (1884), pp. 643-44; hereafter cited as Deloit Speech.

¹¹W. Peterson, "William B. Smith's Last Statement," *Zion's Ensign*, Vol. 5 (1894), No. 3, p. 6, hereafter cited as Peterson Interview.

¹²William Smith on Mormonism, p. 15.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 9. William's apparent personal lack of knowledge prior to 1823 is treated in Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1969), pp. 398-401.

¹⁴Lucy Mack Smith, p. 82.

¹⁵William Smith on Mormonism, p. 9.

¹⁶Murdock Interview.

¹⁷William Smith on Mormonism, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸"Wentworth Letter," *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3 (1842), p. 706.

¹⁹See Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation," p. 379.

²⁰Manuscript History, 1832, extracted from Kirtland Letter Book, cit. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1969), p. 279.

²¹William Smith, Notes, p. 17.

²²Lucy Mack Smith, p. 84.

²³Joseph Smith Journal, kept by Willard Richards January 9, 1843, cit. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1919), Vol. 5, p. 247.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.

²⁵William Smith on Mormonism, p. 10.

²⁶Conference address, October 8, 1845, *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 6 (1845), p. 1014.

²⁷Lucy Mack Smith, p. 89.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 185.

³⁰See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Smiths Who Handled the Plates," *Era*, Vol. 72 (August 1969), pp. 28ff.

³¹Lucy Mack Smith, p. 73.

³²William Smith on Mormonism, p. 5.

³³Peterson Interview.

³⁴Deloit Speech.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Peterson Interview.

³⁸William Smith, Notes, p. 17.

³⁹William Smith on Mormonism, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰Peterson Interview.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Lucy Mack Smith, pp. 40-41, 56, 58.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴⁴Emily A. Smith, *The Life and Letters of Nathan Smith, M. B., M.D.* (New Haven, 1914), pp. 88-90. Dr. Smith writes from New Hampshire up to September 1813 and then from Connecticut from December 1813.

⁴⁵Nathan Smith, *Medical and Surgical Memoirs* (Baltimore, 1831), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁶Manuscript History of the Church, opening narrative, Note A, location and composition described in Jessee, "Early Accounts" (n. 20 *supra*), pp. 291, 294. Acknowledgment is made to President Joseph Fielding Smith for permission to publish Note A.

⁴⁷Lucy Mack Smith, pp. 64-65.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹C. N. Ottosen, "Baptism—Why Age Eight?" *Era*, Vol. 73 (August 1970), pp. 4ff.

⁵⁰William Smith, Notes, p. 8.

⁵¹Deloit Speech.

⁵²Peterson Interview.

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