Introduction

Assassination of a Candidate

Joseph Smith declared his candidacy in the 1844 presidential race as a political reformer on an independent ticket. Joseph never gave his own movement an official name; he believed that all political parties were degraded, their leaders corrupt, and that the entire United States government was in need of reform. In print and from the pulpit he advocated a return to the “holy principles of ’76,” the republican ideals espoused by America’s founding fathers. Smith’s supporters established a political newspaper in New York City, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Truth. Its editors reported on Jeffersonian conventions promoting General Joseph Smith (he was a lieutenant general in the Illinois state militia), described as a man who would be “neither a Whig, a Democrat, or pseudo democratic President, but a President of the United States, not a Southern man with Northern principles, or a Northern man with Southern principles, but an independent man with American principles.”

Joseph Smith was not simply one more third-party candidate for the presidency of the United States. He was the mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois, a flourishing Mississippi River community second only to Chicago in population. And, he was the charismatic founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with tens of thousands of followers who sustained him as a prophet of God.

For the thirty-eight-year-old prophet Joseph, the American presidency was only the beginning. His publicly stated motivation for seeking the presidential chair was to facilitate compensating the Saints for their losses—of life, land, and property—during years of persecution in Missouri and their subsequent expulsion from the state. His private vision (initially made known only to a select inner circle of confidants) was even more ambitious. He prophesied the demise of the United States government within his own lifetime and proclaimed that his political Kingdom of God would ultimately overthrow all earthly regimes in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Smith’s dual political agendas were managed by a secret Council of Fifty, organized as the nucleus of a new world government.

For Joseph and his followers, the prospect was glorious: a heavenly-inspired theocratic democracy where “God and the people [would] hold the power to conduct the affairs of men in righteousness,” a literal fulfillment of the Christian prayer for God’s kingdom to become established “on earth as it is in heaven.” To Joseph’s opponents, the prospect of merging church and state in America meant a frightening, and unacceptable, repudiation of a cornerstone of the constitution.
A nominating convention held in the spring of 1844 confidently expressed the belief that Joseph Smith could carry between two hundred thousand and five hundred thousand votes, or nearly 15 percent of the American electorate, in the upcoming November election. Commentators observed that even if Smith wasn’t successful in his presidential campaign, he was quite possibly in a position to determine the outcome of the contest. On a tide of rising optimism, nearly four hundred political missionaries departed Nauvoo throughout the spring and early summer, preaching the gospel of Mormonism and promoting their prophet’s presidential bid. Many carried General Smith’s Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States, which they preached from the pulpit or stump as if it were an inspired religious tract. The pamphlet soon became the most widely reprinted of all Latter-day Saint publications.1

On the afternoon of Thursday, June 27, 1844, Joseph’s campaign for the presidency and the Kingdom of God came to an abrupt and bloody end. Shortly after 5:00 P.M. a dozen armed men overpowered the guard posted at Carthage jail (in western Illinois’s Hancock County) and ran up the stairs to a landing just outside the jailor’s sitting room. Inside were Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, prophet and patriarch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Both men were in jail on a trumped-up charge of treason against the state for having declared martial law in Nauvoo without direct orders from the governor. Earlier in the day the brothers had been joined by two trusted confidants and fellow Mormons, John Taylor and Willard Richards.

The intruders forced the door open just enough to allow the entry of gun barrels and shot wildly into the room. Hyrum pulled a single-shot pistol out of his waistband but died from a bullet to the face as he fired. Richards and Taylor pressed against the door and with broad swipes of their canes fended off the gun barrels that jabbed through the opening. Joseph responded with three shots from a six-shooter smuggled to him just hours before, striking a man each time. Three times the gun misfired. As he retreated to the window opposite the door, Joseph was shot in the thigh.

1. Thanks to Gordon C. Thomasson for suggesting the title “Assassination of a Candidate.” William Daniels’s 1845 pamphlet, A Correct Account of the Murder of Generals Joseph and Hyrum Smith, written with the assistance of Lyman O. Littlefield, recognized the political motivation behind Joseph Smith’s death. Although written in a primitive nineteenth-century prose style intended as Mormon propaganda, the assertions put forward in A Correct Account are largely corroborated by Junius and Joseph: “Joseph Smith was the choice of many thousands of his countrymen, to guide his country’s destiny,” they wrote. “He was hailed as a patriot—untrammelled by . . . party predilections . . . His principles harmonized with the primitive organization of the government, from which it has been wrested by disloyal spirits. None but bigots and hot-spurs opposed, who trembled at the loss of power and place, and immunities from the government crib. Their antipathy to him was very warm, which soon fanned a blaze of political persecution from the public journals throughout the Union. This, probably, was one engine of destruction that contributed to his death.” (p. 1). Daniels’s A Correct Account (which appeared in pamphlet form in the spring of 1845), was written, in part, as a response to the August 1844 publication of An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith by Illinois Whig editor G. T. M. Davis. The passage was first published in an unauthorized publication of the Daniels-Littlefield manuscript, “A Complete Latter-Day History of the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, At the Carthage Jail, on the 27th day of June, 1844. By Scape-Gallows Daniels,” Warsaw Signal, 25 December 1844. See Vetterli, Mormonism, 280–81.
Outside, random gunshots and grey smoke filled the air. As he rested on the window ledge, Joseph could see more than a hundred outraged citizens and militiamen gathered in the yard below, many with their weapons loaded and aimed directly at him. In order to disguise their identities a number of the men wore their clothes inside out and had painted their faces with a dark mud made from wet gunpowder. The head of the militia, Colonel Levi Williams, commanded his men to shoot the Mormon leader hanging in the second-story window. No one dared.

After some hesitation, Joseph cried, “O Lord, My God,” and leaped to the ground some fifteen feet below. He fell heavily. Joseph’s broken, nearly lifeless body was propped up against the well-curb beside the jail. The men in the yard signaled to those inside that “Old Joe” had jumped out of the window. The assailants rushed down the stairs and faced the Mormon prophet. A four-man firing squad was called out. Within moments, Joseph Smith—lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion, mayor of Nauvoo, prophet of God, master mason, and candidate for the presidency of the United States of America—was dead.

John Taylor was critically wounded in the attack. Willard Richards received a minor nick in the ear. After hiding Taylor under some hay in an adjoining jail cell, Richards descended the stairs in search of a doctor.

The October grand jury was faced with nearly sixty proposed indictments for the murders. After prolonged deliberation, the jurors could agree to prosecute only nine individuals. Five of the men were prominent in Hancock County’s anti-Mormon movement: Thomas C. Sharp, publisher of the Warsaw Signal, Illinois’s leading anti-Mormon newspaper; Levi Williams, colonel of the Fifty-ninth Regiment of the Illinois Militia; Mark Aldrich, major in command of the Warsaw Independent Battalion; William N. Grover, captain of the Warsaw Cadets; and Jacob C. Davis, captain of the Warsaw Rifle Company. Four others were indicted because they were known to have been at the jail at the time of the murders or had been wounded in the exchange of gunfire. Sharp, Williams, Aldrich, Grover, and Davis were arrested and released on bail. The other men fled the county.

Following six days of trial testimony, on May 30, 1845, the jury was assigned the task of weighing the evidence in the case. It didn’t take them long. The jury reached its unanimous verdict in less than three hours: “Not guilty.” The indicted men were free to return to their homes and occupations. The bereaved Mormons braced themselves for more unrest.

Joseph Smith’s murder has been characterized as a violent “mob” reaction to the Mormon prophet’s political extremism. Robert V. Remini, the preeminent scholar of Jacksonian America (and author of the standard biographies of Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster), for example, has recently written that “it is probable that [Smith] was executed for the simple reason that his political activities had become extremely dangerous to the citizens of surrounding towns” in western Illinois. Remini points out that Joseph Smith headed a “theocratic dictatorship in Nauvoo” and was attempting to form an independent, sovereign state in America. “Finally,” Remini concludes, “Joseph had the audacity to run for the presidency of the United States . . . His candidacy was the last straw. In the minds of many he had become a menace to freemen everywhere and had to be eliminated. The courts repeatedly failed to rein him in, so a mob took it upon themselves
to end his life and the danger he posed. His murder was a political act of as-

Assassination of a Candidate

Junius and Joseph examines Joseph Smith’s nearly forgotten presidential bid, the
events leading up to his assassination on June 27, 1844, and the tangled aftermath of
the tragic incident. It extends Remini’s political perspective regarding Joseph Smith’s
death in two key areas. First, this study establishes that Joseph Smith’s murder, rather
than being the deadly outcome of a spontaneous mob uprising, was in fact a care-
fully planned military-style execution. It is now possible to identify many of the key
individuals engaged in planning his assassination as well as those who took part in
the assault on Carthage jail. And second, this study presents incontrovertible evi-
dence that the effort to remove the Mormon leader from power and influence ex-
tended well beyond Hancock County (and included prominent Whig politicians as
well as the Democratic governor of the state), thereby transforming his death from
an impulsive act by local vigilantes into a political assassination sanctioned by some
of the most powerful men in Illinois. The circumstances surrounding Joseph Smith’s
death also serve to highlight the often unrecognized truth that a full understand-
ing of early Mormon history can be gained only when considered in the context of
events taking place in American society as a whole.

It has been long suspected that the Democratic governor of Illinois, Thomas
Ford, was engaged in the plot to kill Joseph Smith. While the evidence assembled
here reaffirms that assertion, the plan to murder the first Mormon prophet was
not spearheaded by the Democrats. In fact, Joseph Smith’s assassination is best
described as the deadly result of a Whig-backed conspiracy that arose when it was
determined that the Mormon prophet’s candidacy might well disrupt the out-
come of the 1844 presidential election. Many of the key players in this drama were
supporters of Kentuckian Henry Clay, the elder statesman of the American Whig
party, and his 1844 bid for the American presidency. Indeed, Clay firmly believed
he was destined to become the next president of the United States. “Clear the Way
for Henry Clay” resounded in party newspapers and political gatherings across the
country.

The lead architect in the campaign to claim Illinois as a Whig state in 1844 was
John J. Hardin, a cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln and stepnephew of Henry Clay. As
the only Illinois Whig serving in U.S. Congress from 1843–45, Hardin oversaw a vast
network of political organizers and local operatives throughout Illinois.

2. Remini, Joseph Smith, 177–78. Other recent examples include the website of the Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints, which stated (January 2004) that Joseph Smith was “killed by a mob”
(lds.org). The influential Church Almanac, 487, similarly notes, “June 27 [1844] — Joseph and
Hyrum Smith were killed by a mob that rushed the Carthage Jail in Carthage, Ill.” Countless histori-
cal markers, exhibit labels, and survey texts use similar language to describe the circumstances
surrounding Joseph Smith’s death. Critical studies generally recognize that the disbanded Warsaw
militia (in collaboration with the Carthage Greys) was largely responsible for the fatal assault on the
jail. The first major scholarly corrective was Oaks and Hill, Carthage Conspiracy, published in 1975.
3. On Whig political disloyalty regarding the Latter-day Saints, the Quincy Herald noted, “The Mor-
mons would doubtless feel much mortified and chagrined that the opinions of their fast friends,
Browning, Jonas, &c. should undergo such a radical change were it not for the expectation that they
will change back again before the next election.” (Copied by the Illinois State Register, 20 October
1843.)
One of these organizers was Abraham Jonas, of Columbus, Adams County, to the east of Quincy. Jonas was a long-time Freemason who masterfully transformed his prominence within the Masonic community into tangible political clout. In 1842, as Grand Master of the Illinois Lodge, Jonas made Joseph Smith a “Mason at Sight” (the first instance of the honor in Illinois Masonic history) and was single-handedly responsible for the establishment of a Mormon Nauvoo lodge that same year. At the time Jonas was running for a seat in the Illinois state legislature on the Whig ticket.

Jonas's political campaign succeeded through Mormon support at the polls. When word of his victory reached Kentucky, Henry Clay (himself a fellow Freemason and former Grand Master of the Kentucky Lodge) congratulated his old friend, adding, “I anxiously hope that your opinions may prove correct of the ultimate political character of Illinois.” Recently retired from the U.S. Senate to devote himself full-time to his presidential campaign, Clay hoped the Latter-day Saints would support him in 1844.

When irregularities were discovered in the Nauvoo lodges’ activities, Jonas’s strident plea in their behalf before the Illinois Grand Lodge went unheeded. The Mormon Lodge lost its charter and Jonas’s support for the Saints soon evaporated.

In the spring of 1844 the Mormons at Nauvoo were experiencing serious internal conflict over Joseph’s bold political moves and public exposure of polygamy (plural marriage). Jonas supported the dominant opposition group headed by William Law, one of Joseph’s former counselors, by supplying the Mormon dissidents with a printing press. It was this press that was used to publish the incendiary *Nauvoo Expositor* on June 7, a move calculated to test the Mormon prophet’s tolerance of dissent. Joseph’s response, as predicted, was to have the press destroyed, a decision that led to his death fewer than three weeks later.

Another Illinois Whig who cultivated Mormon favor only when it was politically expedient to do so was Orville H. Browning, of Quincy, a close friend and associate of Abraham Jonas. It was Browning’s defense of Smith during 1841 (before Judge Stephen A. Douglas) that foiled an extradition attempt by Missouri. In the course of that trial Browning eloquently and emotionally described the suffering of the Saints as they fled the state in 1839:

> Great God! Have I not seen it? Yes my eyes have beheld the blood-stained traces of innocent women and children, in the drear winter, who had traveled hundreds of miles barefoot, through frost and snow, to seek a refuge from their savage pursuers . . .

These oft-quoted words became part of the Mormon collective identity as victims of persecuted innocence.

Browning’s apparent sympathy for the plight of the Saints (and his famed success at freeing the prophet from legal entrapments) doubtless led Joseph, around noon on June 27, 1844, to request Browning’s services once again, to aid in the prophet’s upcoming trial scheduled for the following Saturday. This time Browning did not reply. In the end, the solicitation was immaterial, as Joseph lived only a few

more hours. Browning’s contempt for the Saints was magnified when, months later, he agreed to defend the men accused of killing the Mormon prophet.

Abraham Jonas and Orville H. Browning, in concert with scores of other local Whig operatives, kept the Illinois electorate informed of political developments through public meetings, rallies, and by articles in local newspapers. Flyers were posted announcing the latest political gatherings that featured the best stump speakers of the day. The Whig partisan press also helped shape popular opinion through provocative editorials and the publication of letters to the editor. Extensive campaign literature was sent through the mails.

The first half of the main title of this book is taken from the name of one of the most influential series of 1844 campaign pamphlets, known as the *Junius Tracts*. These were issued by *New York Tribune* publisher and political adviser Horace Greeley, who oversaw the national effort to promote American Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay. *Junius* was originally a pen name signed to letters written by an English Whig who attacked King George III and his royalist faction for not allowing outspoken critic John Wilkes (1727–1797), a champion of freedom of the press and individual liberty, to take his elected seat in Parliament.5

During the 1844 American presidential campaign, newspaper articles and letters to the editor were often signed “Junius” to maintain the author’s anonymity and affirm their allegiance to the Whig cause. Weeks after the Mormon prophet announced his candidacy in the 1844 race a disgruntled Illinois Whig wrote to the editor of the anti-Mormon *Warsaw Signal*. The “deadly coils of Mormon mobocracy,” the writer cautioned, threatened to undermine the very principles upon which the nation was founded. Referring to Joseph’s autocratic rule, his reported misuse of the right of habeas corpus, as well as his plans to establish the political Kingdom of God on the ruins of the government of the United States, the author argued that “by a long series of high-handed outrages, in violation of all law, against the rights, the peace and the liberties of the people,” the Latter-day Saints have “forfeited all claims (if any they ever had) to confidence and respect, and ought justly to receive the condemnation of every individual, not only in the community but in this nation.” The writer signed his letter “Junius Secondus.” As will be demonstrated in the pages that follow, the anonymous Whig author was not alone in his opposition to the Latter-day Saints and their prophet’s political agenda.6

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5. The *Junius Tracts* were written by Calvin Colton and published in 1843–44. The authorship of the original Junius letters has never been determined. See, for example, Jaques, *The History of Junius*.
6. “Junius Secondus” to editor of the *Warsaw Signal* [Thomas Sharp], n.d., Mormon Collection, Beineke Library, Yale University; microfilm, Regional Archives, Western Illinois University.
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