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Chapter One

New World Eden: The Promise of America in Late Jacksonian Politics

The early to mid-nineteenth century was a time of constant and rapid change for most Americans. The period witnessed an explosion of religious fervor throughout the northern states, with scores of new religious movements all claiming exclusive authority from God; westward territorial expansion of Anglo-Protestant civilization accompanied by the displacement of native populations; the increasingly problematic position of black slavery in American society; the proposed annexation of Texas; the proliferation of urban centers and a dramatic increase in manufacturing; and the dominance of the two-party system in American politics. Some saw in these developments the glimmerings of a perfectible society. Others believed the unfamiliar social and economic landscape was an omen of the nation’s downfall.

These intertwined themes of the late Jacksonian period influenced political rhetoric and discourse during the 1844 presidential campaign in very significant ways. This chapter begins with a brief overview of America’s western movement and its devastating impact on the life and culture of indigenous peoples. The second section examines Democratic and Whig political philosophies and the emergence of third parties in national politics. The chapter concludes with a consideration of partisan attitudes towards black slavery and the annexation of Texas in the 1840s. The issues touched upon here will reappear in multiple forms and take on various guises throughout the subsequent narrative.

The Promise of America

“What need wee then to feare, but to goe up at once as a peculier people marked and chosen by the finger of God to possess it?”

John Rolf, Virginia Colony, 1615

The vision of North America as a Promised Land arrived with the first European colonists. For them America had been saved for the civilizing grace of Christianity

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1. The content of this section is indebted to Haynes and Morris, Manifest Destiny and Empire, Stephanson, Manifest Destiny (Virginia quotation, xii), and Hietala, Manifest Design.
and represented an opportunity to establish upon its soil a new utopian society. Individual liberty, the right to do as one pleased without interference, became a national ideal. Native peoples, who had possessed the land for untold generations, presented an awkward challenge to this vision of a New World Eden. To some of the newcomers the first Americans were regarded as a degraded remnant of the Lost Tribes of Israel, a people waiting to be converted to Christ. To others they were less than civilized, destined for removal or annihilation.

The Northwest Ordinance, approved by the United States Congress in 1787, was the first act following American independence to open unorganized land north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi to white settlement, territory that would eventually become the states of Ohio (in 1803), Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), Michigan (1837), and Wisconsin (1848).

The same year the Northwest Ordinance was passed, John Cleves Symmes, a New Jersey Supreme Court judge, was granted permission to sell two million acres in the Ohio country, a tract located between the Great and Little Miami Rivers, tributaries of the Ohio named after one of the Indian tribes that formerly inhabited the region.

The earliest river town to be established in the Symmes Purchase on the land between the Miamis was named Columbia, at that time a popular allegorical symbol of American exceptionalism. The naming of Columbia proudly compared the settlers’ task on America’s newest frontier with Columbus’s discovery of the New World almost three centuries before, both accepted as predestined events acted out in accordance with God’s will. The initial group of Columbia settlers, made up of just over two dozen individuals (twenty men and five women), arrived in November of 1788. Four years later the settlement had grown to more than a thousand residents.

By the mid-1790s Columbia’s prospects were in decline, soon to be eclipsed by rival Cincinnati three miles down river, founded shortly after the establishment of Columbia. At first called Losantiville, in 1790 the town was renamed after the Society of Cincinnati, an association of Revolutionary War officers. In 1794 Cincinnati was still “a village of about 100 log cabins, 15 rough frame houses, and 500 people. Most of the trees in the town plat had been cut down. Stores, taverns, and dwellings lined Front Street; Broadway was a cowpath . . . Sycamore Street a steep wagon road.” Even so, Cincinnatians envisioned a grand future for their frontier town.²

Within five decades of its founding Cincinnati had fulfilled its destiny. With forty-three thousand residents in 1840, Cincinnati was the sixth largest and most ethnically diverse city in the United States, and served as the Ohio River gateway to newer settlements in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri and elsewhere further west. There were more people living in Cincinnati in 1840 than inhabited the entire state of Ohio at the time of its formation in 1803. When Charles Dickens arrived in Cincinnati by riverboat from Pittsburgh in 1842, he discovered “a beautiful city; cheerful, thriving, and animated.”³

For indigenous peoples the promise of America was disease, death, and dislocation. Protestant missionary efforts among the eastern Indian tribes during the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth century were aimed at convincing Native Americans of their “savagery” and of their need to adopt the superior ways of Christian society. Conversion was seen as “inevitable as it was desirable.” As one historian has noted, “missionaries, in short, tried to make Indian men and women into farmers, artisans, and homemakers, mirror images of the supposedly more advanced whites.”

Many Native Americans soon discovered, however, that converting to Christianity, adopting the English language, using Anglicized names and following American social custom did not bring them equality in white society. Furthermore, Protestant assumptions about the cultural inferiority of the American Indian were shared by most government leaders. Judged by American lawmakers to be unworthy of liberty, self-government and even citizenship, the removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands was seen as a necessary precondition for the westward advancement of white Anglo-Protestant civilization.

The language of the Indian Removal Act approved by the United States Congress in 1830 was straightforward. On its face the act provided for “an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states or territories, and for their removal” into unorganized lands “west of the river Mississippi.” The reality was much more brutal. Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s Indian tribes were taken from their native lands and forced to relocate on Western reserves. Many died from disease and never reached their new homelands.

The Wyandot were one of the last of the midwestern Indian tribes to be removed from east of the Mississippi. In 1842 Wyandot leaders concluded an agreement to cede all of their lands in Ohio and Michigan (with the exception of three burial grounds) to the United States. In return, the Wyandots were to be provided with a “permanent annuity” of $17,500 “in current specie” and receive 148,000 acres of reservation land west of the Mississippi River on which to reside. By the early 1840s, most Ohio Wyandots were baptized Methodists and had adopted Western style dress. Few were full-blooded Indians.

On July 9, 1843, the last of the Huron River band of Wyandots, comprised of about 664 tribal members, four dozen wagons and nearly three hundred ponies and horses, departed Upper Sandusky, Ohio and headed south. The weeklong journey took them to the wharfs of Cincinnati on the Ohio where they boarded two steamships, the Republic and the Nodaway, that would take them out West. After departing the Cincinnati docks on July 21 the steamers neared the tomb of President William Henry Harrison, prominently visible on a bluff above the river at North Bend. The Indian elders requested the captain of the Nodaway fire a “big gun” salute to the hero of Tippecanoe. The men of the tribe assembled on the hurricane roofs of the steamships, removed their hats and silently waved them aloft in reverence to the old warrior. A chief stepped forward and spoke for his people. “Farewell Ohio and her braves!”

5. “An Act to provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states or territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi,” 28 May 1830.
Republicanism and Third Parties

“The two great parties are so nicely balanced that a straw may decide the fight.”

D. T. Disney to James K. Polk, October 28, 1844

Republicanism was a founding principle of the American political order that espoused “equality in a society of yeomen freeholders.” For Thomas Jefferson the ideal society was a nation of independent farmers, a republican vision that was never fully realized in the United States due to inequalities that were already present in late colonial times with the onset of the market and manufacturing revolutions. One key philosophical change was that the republican ideal of civic virtue, which originally relied upon the “selfless independent citizen as the basis of social harmony,” was replaced by “personal ambition and devotion to the acquisition of wealth.” By the late eighteenth century the “spirit of free enterprise” became a defining feature of the republican ethic. Political discourse during the Jacksonian period never fully resolved the tension between a rhetoric of social equality and the reality of unbridgeable disparities of wealth and occupation that had already begun to polarize the American electorate.

By the late 1830s a vigorous two-party system had emerged in American politics. The Whig and Democratic parties, each with their own well-defined platforms and political alliances that transcended divisions of geography and social class, determined the agenda of American political life for more than two decades through systematic state and local party organizations. The “two great parties” contested four main issues: the power of the federal government in regional and national development; control over banking, currency and credit; land policy; and internal improvements.

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The Democratic Party claimed descent from the Democratic-Republican Party of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president.
of the U. S. from 1801 to 1809. Andrew Jackson assumed leadership of the Democratic-Republicans in the mid-1820s. Jackson’s two-term presidency (1829–37) and that of his successor, his former vice president Martin Van Buren (1837–1841), set the tenor of life and the outlook of an entire generation of Americans. Beginning in 1840, the organization introduced the practice of announcing the official campaign platform during a national convention and became known as the Democratic Party.

The Democrats of the early 1840s were largely neo-Jeffersonians who promoted the (by then anachronistic) view that agriculture was the economic backbone of American society. Democrats actively discouraged the spread of manufacturing and wanted more land in order to sustain the unique character of American social and political life. They believed that the field, and not the factory, nurtured virtue and promoted equality. Workers were happier toiling in the fields than on the factory floor; mines, mills and factories should remain in Europe, they argued. As one historian has noted, there was “no place for a national bank, spindles or assembly lines in the Jeffersonian garden.” Progress came to be defined in terms of an ever-expanding frontier, which “obviated the need for an active government and made social reform unnecessary.” Indeed, Democrats looked unfavorably upon any government intrusion into the private lives of individuals and believed the federal government should “do nothing” while the states should “do for themselves.”

For most Democrats the expansion of the factory system and rise of urbanization as a fact of American life were viewed as a menace to social stability and harmony. The undesirable effects of mob rule and worker unrest witnessed by the major metropolitan centers of New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, and Philadelphia during the economic recession of 1837 proved that the menace of modernization was real and had to be forestalled. Democrats believed it could be thwarted, at least in part, by allowing access to new lands out West, removing barriers to foreign markets for American agricultural products, and reducing tariffs on imported goods.

Although westward territorial expansion was generally favored by the Democrats, they found it difficult to decide whether newly incorporated states should be slave or free, an issue which also divided America’s industrialized north from the agricultural south. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 maintained the awkward symmetry of free and slave states in the Union. (Slave state Missouri was balanced by the admission of a free Maine.) The proposed incorporation of Texas into the Union in 1837 kept slavery and annexation at the forefront of national policy discussions, a double issue that remained unresolved until well after the 1844 presidential election. (See below.)

The American Whig party was founded in 1836 as a coalition to oppose President Andrew Jackson and the Democrats. Henry Clay of Kentucky and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, both former National Republicans, dominated the party during the first decade of its existence. They promoted what became known as the “American System” of protective tariffs, federally sponsored internal improvement projects, a national bank in order to foster a stable currency, and the conservative

use of federal land sales to benefit individual states. Whigs sought a strong federal government and were opposed to territorial expansion. Whigs wanted to consolidate and develop existing land and feared sectional crises that might result from uncontrolled land acquisitions. Mines, mills, and factories, distrusted by the Democrats due to their socially destabilizing tendencies, were an essential part of the Whig program.

For most Americans the two sides of the political debate were sharply defined. Jacksonian Democrats became self-described as “egalitarian and progressive” populists, and characterized the Whigs as “aristocratic and reactionary.” Another contemporary formulation has the Democrats preferring “freedom and fertile fields” to the “monarchy, mines and manufactories” of the Whig program.11

The stability and effectiveness of the two-party system was strained by the unexpected death of the first Whig president, William Henry Harrison, a month following his inauguration in 1841 and the accession to the presidential chair of his vice president, John Tyler. A Whig in name only, Tyler adopted Democratic strategies in many of his policy decisions and in the end became a president without a party.

During the 1840s the Whigs and Democrats could each count on support from about half of the American electorate. In 1844 the voting population of the United States consisted of only adult white males, at that time approximately 2,700,000 strong. (Because women and slaves were dependents, they were deemed ineligible to participate in the electoral process.) In a procedure established by the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1804, the American president was not voted for directly; instead, local elections determined state electors who, in turn, voted for the nation’s chief executive.

“The two great parties are so nicely balanced that a straw may decide the fight,” a political observer astutely remarked in late 1844. The straw was the unpredictable entrance into the race of a third party, still a relatively new phenomenon in the 1840s, bringing with it the potential to siphon off a sufficient number of votes in order to shift the electoral balance in favor of one or another candidate. Although they tended to be single-platform movements with an underdeveloped national organization, it was soon discovered that third parties exercised political clout beyond that suggested by their relatively small size.

The 1844 presidential campaign began as a struggle for leadership by the Whigs and the Democrats and a play for political influence by the Liberty Party, the first American political party to denounce slavery. Founded in 1839, its 1844 national campaign platform, adopted at Buffalo, New York on August 30, 1843, argued for the “unqualified divorce of the general government from slavery, and also the restoration of equality of rights among men.” The Buffalo resolutions emphasized that the Liberty Party “is not a new party, nor a third party, but is the party of 1776, reviving the principles of that memorable era, and striving to carry them into practical application.” The party’s power and attractiveness to voters, then, lay not only in proclaiming the injustice of black slavery, but also in promoting the restoration of American political ideas as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and a

11. Ibid., 116.
belief that the “moral laws of the Creator are paramount to all human laws . . . we ought to obey God rather than men.”

The potential impact of the Liberty Party came to the notice of national politicians following in the failed bid of Thomas Corwin, a Clay Whig from Lebanon, Ohio, to be re-elected as governor of his home state in 1842. The Liberty Party, which polled 5,405 votes in the Ohio gubernatorial race, divided Whig partisans on the issue of slavery and turned what would have been a Whig victory over to the Democrats. Corwin lost by fewer than four thousand votes.

The Libertymen first put forward a national presidential candidate in 1840. And they would do so again in 1844. Although neither effort was successful, in both races the Liberty Party succeeded in eroding the Whig political base in a number of states, most notably New York, and contributed to Henry Clay’s narrow defeat in 1844.

The Liberty Party’s entry into the 1844 race was not the only destabilizing factor, however. The rise of political Mormonism was also a significant concern, especially in Illinois, where the Latter-day Saints were a commanding presence. “I am a third party, and stand independent and alone,” the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. had declared before thousands of his followers at Nauvoo in the fall of 1843. Mormons were known for voting as a bloc and had attracted the attention of both Whig and Democratic electioneers. In recent elections the Latter-day Saints had overwhelmingly supported Democratic candidates. Anticipating that the Latter-day Saints would once again support the Democrats, the Whigs redoubled their efforts to influence the Mormon vote. The Democrats were only slightly less active.

Amidst increased Whig and Democratic campaign posturing, Joseph Smith recognized the potentially strategic role he could play in the upcoming national campaign. To the surprise of nearly everyone (except perhaps himself) within six months Joseph was prepared to enter the presidential race “on his own hook,” without benefit of support by either major political party.

As was noted earlier, Joseph Smith was not simply another independent candidate for America’s highest office. He was a prophet of God. And, more than just wanting to secure redress for the injuries suffered by the Saints during their years


of persecution in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, Joseph Smith also believed that he was chosen to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth, providing the two prime motivations—the one taught publicly, the other revealed only to a select few—for his presidential candidacy in 1844.

In order to understand the rationale behind these two interwoven agendas, it is important to review the early history of Joseph Smith’s religious movement, popularly known as Mormonism. Born in Sharon, Vermont, in 1805, Joseph Smith expounded a unique and multifaceted restoration theology, departing from both mainstream Protestant and Catholic teachings. Even before the Church’s formal organization in 1830, Joseph Smith preached that after the death of the apostles in the first century the world had fallen into a state of apostasy. God chose him, a young farm boy then living in upstate New York, to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth. In 1830 Joseph became the “first elder” in the newly-organized Church of Christ.

Soon after the publication of the Book of Mormon that same year, a religious history of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas that Joseph claimed to have translated from golden plates delivered to him by a heavenly messenger, the name of the book was attached to his followers and the church he founded. The story opens with the ancient Hebrew prophet Lehi and his family, including his sons Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel, escaping Jerusalem and making the difficult sea voyage to the Americas. From its earliest chapters, the Book of Mormon identifies America as the “promised land.”

Joseph Smith taught that Laman and his followers, cursed with a dark skin because of their unbelief, were the ancestors of the American Indian. Some of the earliest Latter-day Saint missions were dedicated to bringing the message of Christ to America’s native population, with the object of removing the Lamanite curse, and teaching them of their forgotten Old World heritage. Because of this special relationship between Mormons and the American Indian, the time soon came when the Latter-day Saints were accused of “plotting with the Indians” against the United States government.

In 1837 the official name of the organization became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reflecting more accurately the movement’s central belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ and the commencement of His millennial reign on the earth. Joseph served as the Lord’s “Prophet, Seer and Revelator” to his followers.

The chief presiding officers of the church consisted of the First Presidency (made up of the prophet and his two counselors) and the Council (or Quorum) of the Twelve Apostles, special witnesses of Christ to the world “equal in authority and power” to the First Presidency. At the local level, congregations were organized into wards or branches, headed by a bishop or branch president. Following Old Testament tent symbolism, these units were gathered into stakes, each with its own presidency and High Council of presiding elders.

In the summer of 1831, little more than a year after the organization of the church, twenty-five-year-old Joseph Smith arrived in Hamilton, seat of southwest Ohio's Butler County, twenty-five miles north of Cincinnati on the Great Miami River. Traveling with Joseph was thirty-eight-year-old Sidney Rigdon. The two men called on Sidney’s older brother, Dr. Laomi Rigdon, at his home on Main Street.

Dr. Rigdon was a leading Butler County physician. He married Rebecca Dunlevy, of Lebanon, Warren County, Ohio, in 1816 and in the 1820s established a medical practice in partnership with her younger brother John. Hamilton remained Laomi’s home until his death in 1865.

Even before the arrival of Joseph and Sidney, the Dunlevys and Rigdons, both distinguished southern Ohio Baptist families, had encounters with some of America's most innovative religious movements. Rebecca’s uncle, John Dunlevy, had joined the Shakers in 1805 and was the author of an influential Shaker treatise, The manifesto: or A Declaration of the Doctrines and Practice of the Church of Christ, first published in 1818. The Shakers differed from most other Christian sects of the period in that they believed that celibacy was the means to “live free from sin” in the coming millennium. There was a sizeable Shaker settlement at Turtle Creek, on the outskirts of Lebanon. Rebecca's father, Francis Dunlevy, often acted on behalf of the religious community during conflicts with local citizenry.

Sidney Rigdon, Joseph's traveling companion, had been a follower of restorationist Alexander Campbell for several years in the 1820s and commanded a substantial following in the northern Ohio village of Mentor. Like Joseph Smith, Campbell preached the need for a restoration of primitive Christianity. They differed in how that was to be accomplished. Campbell made no claims of a higher calling from God; for him the heavens were no longer open. Joseph Smith, on the other hand, claimed that as a young man he had been visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ, who personally announced his mission of restoration. In the course of his relatively short career Joseph Smith received numerous revelations concerning God’s will for His people and for the world.

Sidney met Joseph Smith in the fall of 1830, and was soon converted (together with much of his congregation) to the gospel of Mormonism. Nearby Kirtland, Ohio, became a gathering place for the new religious movement.

It was with a great deal of interest, then, that Rigdon and Dunlevy family members assembled in the doctor’s home on Main Street in Hamilton that summer of
1831. Anthony Howard Dunlevy, Rebecca’s brother (and Sidney’s brother-in-law), was not impressed with the new prophet. “Sidney did all the talking,” he would later recall. “Jo. Smith had little to say, but deferred to his companion on all matters of explanation.” In Dunlevy’s view, the advent of Sidney Rigdon was essential to the survival of the Mormon movement. Sidney, he noted, “would quote by memory whole passages with great facility, giving to them meaning and views which no other person would see in them. In that particular he was exactly suited to give to the Book of Mormon a significance which no other person, not even Jo. Smith himself, could conceive, much less impart to others.”

Following the family visit Joseph and Sidney journeyed westward to Independence, Jackson County, Missouri. The prophet declared Jackson County to be the future site of Zion, the New Jerusalem of Biblical tradition. In August of that year the two men dedicated a portion of southwestern Missouri “to the Lord for a possession and inheritance for the Saints.” Their *Evening and Morning Star* newspaper, published in Independence, promoted the gathering of the faithful to Missouri.

In the summer of 1833 conflict with the old settlers of Jackson County resulted in the destruction of the Mormon press there (which was preparing to publish the prophet’s revelations) and the expulsion of the Saints by the end of the year. Church leaders petitioned the state for compensation for the lands and property that had been lost or destroyed during the forced exodus. Their request was ignored.

Kirtland, Ohio, prospered for several years. But by 1838, Kirtland, too, was effectively abandoned, leaving behind the first Latter-day Saint temple (completed in 1836), a monument to the dedication and sacrifice willingly undertaken by the early Saints, a failed banking experiment, and growing disaffection among less stalwart church members.

The headquarters of the church soon gravitated to Far West, in northern Missouri’s Caldwell County, where Joseph Smith arrived in mid-March of 1838. Joseph taught his followers that this was the location of the Garden of Eden, that Adam, the first man, had lived nearby at a place known as Spring Hill (restored by Joseph to Adam-ondi-Ahman, “the land where Adam dwelt”). Joseph even identified the very pile of stones Adam had made into an altar where he “offered up sacrifice after he was cast out of the garden.” Missouri, then, represented both the beginning of human time (Adam-ondi-Ahman) and, with the coming of the millennium, the place where time would end (Independence).

By the fall of 1838 reports circulated that the Mormon prophet was claiming his “prophecies are superior to the laws of the land . . . he would tread down his enemies, and walk over their dead bodies; and if he was not let alone, he would be a second Mohammed to this generation.” Joseph fully intended to take over the

reigns of government by virtue of his divine call to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth.20

On October 27, 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued an order to his state militia: “The Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good.” During the outbreak of hostilities Joseph established a private militia. Popularly known as the Danites, the brotherhood was named after the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, which prophesied that in the last days the temporal Kingdom of God, described as a stone “cut out of the mountain without hands,” would roll forth and destroy the nations of the world. The prophecy was emphatic: “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). One purpose of the Danite order was “to put right physically that which is not right, and to cleanse the Church of very great evils which hath hitherto existed among us inasmuch as they cannot be put

20. Orson Hyde and Thomas B. Marsh affidavit, 18 October 1838, in Smith, History of the Church 3:167, also quoted in Fulness of Times, 199. While the importance of establishing the Kingdom of God was noted as early as the Kirtland years, Joseph Smith’s first formal revelation on the political Kingdom of God was received in Nauvoo, on 7 April 1842. The revelation is not included in the LDS (Latter-day Saints) Doctrine and Covenants. See Marquardt, Revelations, Doc. 164, and Joseph Smith’s early comments on theocratic rule in “The Government of God,” Times and Seasons 3 (15 July 1842): 855–56. Hill and Oaks, Carthage Conspiracy, 7, Hill, Quest for Refuge, 188, note 36, and Cartwright, Autobiography, 345, quoted in Godfrey, “Causes of Conflict,” 63.
to right by teachings and persuasions.” Although the Danite band was in existence only for about six weeks in the fall of 1838, the symbolic impact of the organization (and the prominence of individual members) continued to be felt throughout the nineteenth century, attaining an almost mythic status for the sometimes merciless actions that the Danites carried out in the name of their prophet and their God.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21} Smith, History of the Church 3:175 (extermination quote). The term “extermination” was first used in Sidney Rigdon’s famous 4 July 1838 oration, published as Rigdon, Oration Delivered . . . , quoted
Joseph, Sidney, and other church leaders were arrested by Missouri officials in early November and charged with treason—in part for allegedly claiming they would eventually take political control of the state and fulfill the prophecy of Daniel. The men were imprisoned in the jail at Liberty, Missouri. Joseph remained incarcerated throughout the harsh winter of 1838–39. On account of his poor health Sidney Rigdon was released in January.

The main body of the Saints left Missouri in early 1839 and settled, temporarily, in the vicinity of Quincy, Illinois, a Mississippi river town of 1,200. As thousands of Saints arrived in western Illinois, without food, clothing, or shelter, the local population found itself unable to accommodate the massive influx of refugees. A new home for the Latter-day Saints was desperately needed.

While still confined in Liberty jail, Joseph Smith instructed church leaders to purchase land to establish once again a refuge for the beleaguered Saints. When Joseph escaped from his Missouri captors in April of 1839, he moved quickly to finalize several large land purchases. These included a tract of swampland near a bluff overlooking a bend on the Mississippi River. Known to earlier settlers as Venus, and later Commerce, Joseph renamed the town Nauvoo, “the beautiful.”

The prophet received a revelation that the Saints should appeal to the federal government for assistance in receiving compensation from the state of Missouri for losses resulting from their forced expulsions. Nearly five hundred affidavits documenting the maltreatment of the Saints in Missouri were collected and sent to the United States Congress.

Joseph Smith led a delegation to Washington City, where he met with Democratic president Martin Van Buren. The chief executive was not sympathetic. The issue of states rights versus the power of the federal government and the fear of alienating his political constituencies colored Van Buren’s response to the prophet’s entreaty. “Gentlemen, your cause is just,” Van Buren reportedly told the Mormon delegates, “but I can do nothing for you.” The petition to Congress was unsuccessful. Joseph concluded, “if all hopes of obtaining satisfaction for the injuries done us be entirely blasted, that they then appeal our case to the Court of Heaven, believing that the Great Jehovah, who rules over the destiny of nations, and who notices the falling sparrows, will undoubtedly redress our wrongs, and ere long avenge us of our adversaries.”

In addition to displaying his growing disdain for organized political parties and partisan politicians, this passage also skillfully promotes the prophet’s mantra of “persecuted innocence.” Joseph taught that because the Latter-day Saints were God’s...
chosen people, the Lord was on their side. Any opposition to their cause was unjustified and unrighteous persecution, a concept that retains enormous power and influence among the Latter-day Saints even today.

With the assistance of Dr. John C. Bennett, a prominent Springfield-area physician who converted to Mormonism shortly after meeting the prophet in the summer of 1840, a city charter was granted to Nauvoo by the Illinois state legislature. In common with charters granted to Springfield and other Illinois cities, the document allowed Nauvoo to organize a municipal council, a municipal court, a local militia (to be called the Nauvoo Legion, in which Joseph Smith was commissioned a Lieutenant General by the governor of Illinois), and a university.

Significantly, political power at Nauvoo was consolidated in five individuals: “the mayor, four aldermen, and nine councilors. The mayor and aldermen also served as judges of the municipal court . . . This meant that five men controlled the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the local government.” The combination would prove to be both the fountain of the city’s power and the germ of its eventual destruction.

Another provision that gave unexpected force to the authority of Nauvoo’s government was a clause that directed the city’s militia (composed of all able-bodied males, their arms supplied by the state of Illinois) to “be at the disposal of the mayor in executing the laws and ordinances of the city corporation, and the laws of the State.”

The Nauvoo swamp was drained. The town was surveyed and laid out on a neat grid. Grist mills, general stores, private dwellings of rough-hewn logs, clapboard, and brick, and a river landing were constructed. The former mosquito-infested town with a handful of residents soon numbered in the thousands, with more arrivals docking nearly every day.

Plans for a temple on the bluff above the city were also completed, the Saints donating a tenth of their income or labor to assist in the effort. The cornerstone of the Nauvoo temple were laid on April 6, 1841, the eleventh anniversary of the organization of the church. Joseph was finally realizing his dream of establishing a sanctuary for the persecuted Saints and building a House of the Lord in which to perform His sacred ordinances for the salvation of the faithful.

With ten to twelve thousand inhabitants in 1843, Nauvoo was the second largest city in Illinois, rivaled only by Chicago. The Holy City, as it was often called, dominated the economy of the region. Hancock County could claim just two additional settlements of any significance: Warsaw, “a business place a little below Nauvoo” on the eastern shore of the Mississippi, and Carthage, the county seat, “another trading village or town in the interior.” Each had a population of about four hundred inhabitants.

Shortly after announcing his candidacy in the spring of 1844, Joseph Smith proceeded to organize an efficient political machine to forward his dual ambitions. His political writers included accomplished editors and experienced newspapermen.


secret committee, known as the Council of Fifty, was convened to both establish the political Kingdom of God and manage his presidential campaign.

Joseph Smith’s main political newspaper in the east was published by the Society for the Diffusion of Truth in New York City. Called *The Prophet*, the paper reported on Mormon “Jeffersonian Conventions” promoting the candidacy of “General Joseph Smith.”

Unlike the Liberty Party, with its single-minded focus on the abolition of slavery, Joseph Smith presented a multiplank platform before the American people. His *Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States* was first issued as a small pamphlet from Nauvoo, Illinois in February of 1844 and later reprinted or excerpted by several national newspapers. One Indiana businessman noted that Joseph Smith was “the first man since the days of Washington and Jefferson, who had been frank and honest enough to give his views to the people before being elected.”

According to his electioneers, Joseph Smith’s political views “took a line between the two [major] parties,” influenced more by personal experience than affiliation with a particular political cause. Smith’s support for “liberty, freedom and equal rights” together with “protection of person and property” guaranteed by a strong federal government, for example, were policy positions forged out of the persecutions and

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losses suffered by the Saints in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Joseph’s proposal to create a national bank, although no doubt based in part upon the disastrous results of his own banking experiment in Kirtland, Ohio, echoed the long-declared position of Whig party leaders. Joseph Smith’s promotion of free trade and the idea that the people (and not the government) are the true “sovereigns of the soil,” aligned him more closely with Jeffersonian Democrats. 27

Aside from the catchy slogans and campaign posturing, however, Joseph Smith, together with the other presidential candidates, recognized that far more than political rhetoric was at stake in the upcoming election. The outstanding issue of the 1844 campaign was slavery and the annexation of Texas.

Slavery and the Question of Texas

“In connection with the wonderful events of this age, much isdoing towards abolishing slavery, and colonizing the blacks, in Africa.”

Mormon political writer W. W. Phelps, 1833 28

When Stephen F. Austin led a colony of three hundred southerners (many of them slave owners) into the Texas wilderness in 1821, the land was still under the control of Spain. Mexican independence was declared less than a year later. After nearly fifteen years under Mexican rule, Texas proclaimed itself an independent republic on March 2, 1836. The United States of America recognized Sam Houston and his Republic of Texas the following year. The question of annexation became an issue almost immediately and was still unresolved at the time of the American presidential election in 1844. If Texas was admitted into the Union it was assumed by some, and feared by others, that it would become a slave state.

The antislavery campaign in the United States was headed by men who recognized the inherent wrongness of owning another human being yet at the same time questioned the propriety of giving black men full civil rights. Most antislavery movements supported gradual emancipation, segregation of the races, unequal rights for blacks, and colonization, sentiments that crossed party lines. In his public remarks on the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case, which upheld the denial of citizenship rights to blacks, for example, Republican Abraham Lincoln expressed agreement with his opponent, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, that the races should not mix. “Judge Douglas is especially horrified at the thought of the mixing of blood by the white and black races: agreed for once—a thousand times agreed,” Lincoln replied. “There are white men enough to marry all the white women, and black men enough to marry all the black women; and so let them be married . . . A separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation but as all immediate separation is impossible the next best thing is to keep them apart where they

27. See Chapter Ten: What Will Be the End of Things?

The content of this section is indebted to Hietala, *Manifest Design*, especially “Texas, the Black Peril, and Alternatives to Abolitionism,” 10–54 and Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas*. 
are not already together.”

The 1840 census of the United States appeared to support the desirability of slavery and exposed the horrible consequences if abolitionism were adopted as a national program. The census “showed that, under the kindly paternalism of plantation masters, slaves flourished, and that by contrast, free Negroes in the North, living under an impersonal wage system, disintegrated.” Doctor Edward Jarvis, a New England specialist on the insane, discovered that the census figures were in error. Dr. Jarvis noted that “the columns of the white insane were next to those of the colored insane,” and, as is well known by every genealogist who has worked in the records of the period, “these columns were long and many towns on a page, and it required a very accurate eye and careful discipline to select the proper column for a fact, and to follow it down from the heading.” Because the census was carried out by individuals who frequently failed to exercise proper care, “the figures representing the white lunatics of many towns were placed in the column of the colored.” The results were deceiving. “Towns which had no colored population on one page, were represented on the other as having colored lunatics; and in many others the number of colored lunatics was more than that of the colored living; others were stated to have a large part of their colored people insane.” It was soon published abroad that “cold is destructive to the mental health of the African . . . in the United States where only one in 2,117 is insane in Georgia the warmest state, and one in fourteen in Maine, the coldest.”

A Georgia representative in Congress agreed with Jarvis that the census and the environmental interpretation of black mental health was in error, “but,” he added, “it is too good a thing for our [southern] politicians to give up, and many of them have prepared speeches based on this, which they cannot afford to lose.” The political argument was appallingly simple: “Humanity . . . demands that Texas be added to our nation, and opened to the occupation of our surplus slaves to save them from mental death.”

In February 1844, a “Letter of Mr. Walker of Mississippi, Relative to the Annexation of Texas,” was issued to convince northern Democrats and Whigs of the benefits that would accrue from annexation, that it was “the surest and most peaceful mode of solving the slavery and race problems.” Senator Walker claimed that annexation would draw slaves and their owners from all the “worn-out lands” in the South. When Texas’s soils were depleted, the planters would free their slaves, who could simply cross the Rio Grande into Mexico and the lands southward. “There they would not be a degraded caste,” as in America, Walker continued, “but equals among equals, 29. “Abraham Lincoln on the Dred Scott Decision,” 26 June 1857, transcription in afroamhistory.about.com/library/blincoln_dred_scott.htm.
31. Jarvis, Autobiography, 63, quoted in Merk, Slavery, 119. Due to a transcription error, Davico identifies the Georgia senator as “Mr. Bencan”. Merk correctly identifies him as Whig leader John M. Berrien. On Berrien, Clay, and the Latter-day Saints, see Chapter Two, note 5. The census argument was also made in the Walker Letter (see below). Appended to the letter is “Table No. 1, compiled from census of 1840, of deaf and dumb, blind, idiots, and insane.” On p. 14, Walker writes, “[In Mexico] cold and want and hunger will not drive the African, as we see it does in the North, into the poorhouse and the jail, and the asylums of the idiot and insane.” (Merk, Fruits of Propaganda, 234).
not only by law, but by feeling and association.” Walker’s argument became known as the “safety-valve” thesis.32

Possibly influenced by the Walker Letter, independent presidential candidate Joseph Smith proposed a similar solution to America’s slavery problem. Joseph Smith opposed the then-current situation in the United States where “two or three millions of people are held as slaves for life, because the spirit in them is covered with a darker skin than ours.” He called for liberty for all men “without reference to color or condition: ad infinitum” and advocated “national equalization” for blacks, although he, like most Americans of the time, also believed they should be segregated from whites and confined “by strict law to their own species.” Liberty was not to be color-blind.33

In order to accomplish his goal of abolishing slavery in the United States by 1850 and maintaining racial segregation, Smith proposed to annex Texas. He would “liberate the slaves in two or three [southern] States,” compensate their owners, “and send the [free] negroes to Texas, and from Texas to Mexico, where all colors are alike.” If there was insufficient land in Mexico to handle the influx of newly freed blacks, he would “call upon Canada, and annex it.”34

White Americans had struggled with the “problem” of free blacks for decades. The Walker Letter and Joseph Smith’s Texas solution were identical in effect to the scheme proposed by the American Colonization Society, an organization dedicated to returning freed slaves to the colony of Liberia (“liberty”) on Africa’s western coast. “There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children,” Henry Clay asserted during a speech before the ACS in 1827, “whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence. Transplanted in a foreign land, they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty.” The ACS argument was remarkably similar to that made by politicians justifying the removal of the American Indian. In any case, in contrast to the Indian Removal Program, the Colonization Society was never very successful at achieving its goals and over the course of its existence returned no more than eleven thousand free blacks to the African coast.35

During an unofficial election tour of the South in early February of 1844, Henry Clay learned from a gentleman “just arrived . . . from Texas,” that following a secret vote forty-two American senators were found “in favor of the annexation of Texas, and have advised the President,” John Tyler, “that they will confirm a treaty to that effect; that a negotiation has been opened accordingly in Texas, and that a treaty will be speedily concluded.” This was devastating news for the former Kentucky senator.


34. Smith, History of the Church 6:244. Compare Smith, American Prophet’s Record, 457 [7 March 1844]. The supposed equality of the races in Mexico is also stressed in the Walker Letter, 15, in Merk, Fruits of Propaganda, 235.

An acknowledged opponent of annexation, Clay wrote to a friend, “If it be true, I shall regret extremely that I have had no hint of it.”

On April 12, 1844, a treaty of annexation was concluded between Texas and the U.S. Henry Clay, himself a slaveholder and antiabolitionist, felt obligated to speak out before the treaty was submitted to the Senate for ratification. In a letter written from Raleigh, North Carolina, Clay pointed out that Mexico had not abandoned its right to Texas. “Under these circumstances, if the Government of the United States were to acquire Texas, it would acquire along with it all the incumbrances which Texas is under, and among them the actual or suspended war between Mexico and Texas . . . Annexation and war with Mexico are identical.” His concerns went further than war, however. The future of slavery was at stake.

“Suppose Great Britain and France, or one of them,” Clay continued, “were to take part with Mexico, and by a manifesto . . . maintain the independence of Texas, disconnected with the United States, and to prevent the further propagation of slavery from the United States.” Abolitionists, both in the U.S. and in England, Clay knew, wanted a Texas without slavery. In late 1843 the British had entered into secret negotiations with Sam Houston for establishing an independent free-soil Texas, with the goal of “abolish[ing] slavery, not only in Texas, but throughout the world.” If an independent Texas republic became a reality, slaveholding Southern Democrats and Whigs feared that their “slaves in the great valley of the Mississippi . . . would all run over to Texas and under British influence [be] liberated and lost to their owners.”

If, on the other hand, Texas were to become part of the Union, Clay believed that Texas was “susceptible of a division into five states of Convenient size and form . . . two slave and three Free,” a move that would upset the precarious balance negotiated by the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Clay’s letter was published in the Daily National Intelligencer on April 27, 1844, less than a week before the national Whig nominating convention in Baltimore. Although the Raleigh Letter engendered heated debate off of the convention floor, the official Whig campaign platform for 1844 made no mention of Texas, slavery, or annexation. And while Clay’s public opposition to accepting Texas into the Union did not cost him the Whig presidential nomination, it significantly weakened his national appeal.

Martin Van Buren, former U.S. president and frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1844, also issued a statement opposing annexation. When it appeared in the press on the same day as Clay’s letter, collusion between the two men, although unproven, was widely suspected. Earlier that month Clay had written that Van Buren, “if he does not alter his position, stands opposed. We shall

therefore occupy common ground. And his present attitude, renders it necessary that I should break silence. If he change his position, and come out for annexation, it will be so much worse for him.” In fact, by publishing his antiexpansionist “attitude” Van Buren lost the Democratic nomination.\(^{39}\) The Democratic national convention assembled at Baltimore in late May, three weeks after the Whigs’ gathering. Following eight unsuccessful ballots, a compromise dark horse candidate from Tennessee, James K. Polk, was accepted as their presidential nominee. In an effort to compensate for Van Buren’s public letter opposing annexation, the Democratic campaign platform called for “re-occupation of Oregon” and the “re-annexation of Texas,” claiming that the United States had full legal right to the western territories.\(^{40}\)

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The campaign for 1844 did not begin with the formal votes for Whig and Democratic presidential candidates in Baltimore. And it didn’t begin when the official campaign platform was approved and sent to press. The campaign for 1844 began years earlier when aspiring men determined that the presidential chair was their life’s ambition. Kentucky senator Henry Clay was one such individual. U.S. Supreme Court judge John McLean was another. As national Whig leaders both men understood that only one could win their party’s presidential nomination. One of them would lose.

Our narrative begins in June 1843, almost a full year before the Whig and Democratic nominating conventions. The scene shifts from metropolitan Baltimore to the Illinois prairie. Judge John McLean, recently arrived by riverboat from Cincinnati, has settled into his courtroom on the second floor of the capitol building in Springfield, Illinois, prepared to hear four weeks of cases brought before the Circuit Court of the United States for the Seventh District.

\(^{39}\) Henry Clay to John J. Crittenden, 21 April 1844, in Hopkins and Hargreaves, Papers of Henry Clay 10:48. Although he cites this letter, Remini, Henry Clay, 641, insists, “This coincidence—and it was coincidence—generated all kinds of rumors.” National Party Conventions, 29.

\(^{40}\) National Party Conventions, 30. This dual argument was also made in the Walker Letter (see above). Merk, Fruits of Propaganda, 121–28.