Junius And Joseph

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Chapter Seven

The Candidate

“I will show you, sir, that I will raise up a government in these United States which will overturn the present government, and I will raise up a new religion that will overturn every other form of religion in the country.”

Joseph Smith to Peter Cartwright, 1839

“Did Joe Smith . . . say . . . he would be President of the United States, (God would give him the office if he wanted it), and then he would show them what a Bonaparte could do?”

Warsaw Signal July 7, 1841

Joseph Smith’s November 1843 inquiry to presidential hopefuls summoned a predictable response from Democratic senator John C. Calhoun. “As you refer to the case of Missouri,” responded the South Carolinian, “candor compels me to repeat what I said to you at Washington,” in 1839, “that, according to my views, the case does not come within the jurisdiction of the Federal Government, which is one of limited and specific powers.” Joseph requested one of his political writers, William W. Phelps, to draft a response, highlighting “the folly of keeping p[e]ople out of their right[s] and that there was power in government to redress wrongs.”

Smith’s reply was biting. “Permit me, as a law-abiding man, as a well-wisher to the perpetuity of constitutional rights and liberty, and as a friend to the free worship of Almighty God by all, according to the dictates of every person’s own conscience, to say that I am surprised that a man or men in the highest stations of public life should have made up such a fragile ‘view’ of a case.” If one accepted Calhoun’s reasoning, Joseph continued, “a ‘sovereign state’ is so much more powerful than the United States, the parent Government, that it can exile you at pleasure, mob you with

impunity, confiscate your lands and property, have the Legislature sanction it—yea, even murder you as an edicto of an emperor, and it does no wrong; for the noble Senator of South Carolina says the power of the federal Government is so limited and specific, that it has no jurisdiction of the case! What think ye of imperium in imperio?"  

Joseph's presidential correspondence became a popular topic of Nauvoo conversation. Joseph had brother Phelps read his letter to John C. Calhoun before visitors to the Nauvoo Mansion. The prophet gave evening lectures on “the Constitution and candidates for the Presidency.”

“John C. Calhoun cant [sic] be president of the United States!” the anti-Mormon Warsaw Message exclaimed in mock seriousness. “‘Cause why:’ Joe Smith has declared against him.” The Smith-Calhoun correspondence was soon published in the national press, giving Americans their first glimpse of Joseph Smith's political agenda.

Political observers in Illinois detected a decidedly anti-Democratic bias in Joseph's rhetoric. “The Mormons are in favour of Tarriff, Bank & a Distribution of the proceeds of the sales of the public Domain,” a Cass County Whig reported to Congressman John J. Hardin in mid-January. “Being in favor of the[se] three propositions [the Mormons] are of course in favour of Mr. Clay [and] . . . We intend to carry Illinois for Mr. Clay.”

Clay Clubs were formed throughout the state. Monthly meetings were large and spirited. “We are on the eve of a political turnover in Illinois,” one Whig organizer promised. “The Dems are quarrelling among themselves daily. We are like a band of Brothers . . . You can’t find a Whig that will agree not to vote for Clay.” Henry Clay himself was encouraged by the Whig movement. “I should be extremely happy to see Illinois added to the Whig states,” Clay wrote to one organizer, “and with the Clubs which you have formed and a system of organization, extending to all the Counties, I do not see why that desirable object might not be accomplished.”

In Hancock County the editor of the Warsaw Message, Thomas Gregg, expressed concern about the lack of Whig political organization at the local level. “We have heard considerable talk, at different times, about the formation of Clay Clubs in our Village,” Gregg began, “but no steps have yet been taken to carry out such an object.” The New York Tribune had “many valuable & cheap publications, intended for distribution through the Mail.” He recommended several for local use, including The Life and Speeches of Henry Clay and The Junius Tracts. “The enemy are already marshaling their forces, and strengthening their fortresses, in preparation for the conflict in

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November next. Nine short months have only to pass . . . Shall we not have a Clay Club?" An organizational meeting was scheduled for late February.9

Anson G. Henry, the State Central Committee chairman responsible for coordinating Whig organizing efforts throughout Illinois, reported to Hardin in late January. “We are not idle and intend in good earnest to make a struggle to carry Illinois . . . I am making every effort to perfect the organization of the state, and . . . we are urging the formation of ‘Clay Clubs’ at every county seat and in every precinct. Our project of a ‘German paper’ will succeed. I have already recd. 250$ and have $390 more promised, and this from 30 counties. The remaining 69 counties not yet heard [from] will certainly make up the $1000 which is all that is required.”

Henry had also begun publication of a single-sheet political newspaper, The Olive Branch. “With a paper of this kind we can place in the hands of every voter in the state all the important facts and documents,” Henry told Hardin. “We would like to grace the first No. with one of your best ‘Beaumoc’ speeches on the tariff and things in general, with a reasonable share of soft soap for the ‘Mormons’ and abolitionists if you think it will do any good. The abolitionists proper won’t go for Clay anyhow unless he liberates his slaves and moves into a free state, and this we know he won’t do. The Mormons are worth coaxing a little. They are violent against Van [Buren] and inclined to go for Clay. Their vote will about turn the scale in the state.”10

The Niles’ National Register (published in Baltimore) concurred with Henry’s views:

This singular community contrive to make themselves of importance. Numbering as they do, many thousand persons, all moving with perfect devotion at the nod of their prophet, and burning with ardor in a cause which most of them believe to be of divine authority,—holding as they do, grants made to them from time to time by the legislature of Illinois, of very large, not to say unusual corporative powers,—and wielding as they are well aware the balance of power between the two great political powers in the state, they feel their importance, and contrive to make others feel it also.

James Gordon Bennett, editor of the Democratic New York Herald, went even further than Niles. “It appears,” he wrote, “that the Mormons are preparing to regulate matters so as to control the presidential question in the ensuing election.” Realistic or not, Bennett was the not alone in his recognition that the Mormons were gravitating to the very center of national political discourse.11

11. “Illinois, the Mormons,” Niles’ National Register, 3 February 1844. This article commented on the James Arlington Bennett-Joseph Smith correspondence. Niles’ National Register also published “Correspondence of Gen. Jos. Smith and Hon. J. C. Calhoun” the same day. The Nauvoo Neighbor, 21 February 1844, is quoting from the New York Herald of uncertain date. Also published in the Pittsburgh Christian Advocate, 21 February 1844, quoting from the Cincinnati Chronicle of uncertain date. Graham, “Presidential Campaign,” 53, note 21, remarks, “This is another example of how pervasive was the newspaper network of this period.”
John F. Cowan (one of Joseph’s non-Mormon aides-de-camp and a lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion) was dispatched by the prophet to confer personally with the presidential frontrunners. Cowan met Henry Clay in late January during the senator’s unofficial campaign tour of the South. “I had a long conversation with Mr. Clay,” Cowan reported from New Orleans. “He told me he had received a letter from you in regard to his views of the Mormons. There is one thing very certain; that he is a very good friend of yours, and speaks highly in favor of your church.” Cowan advised Smith to be circumspect in his public statements about the elder statesman. “General, Mr. Clay is sure to be elected if he lives—so be cautious . . . Had you better not put up some of your boys—to start a ‘Clay Club’ in Nauvoo, so to make the matter shine up right.” That way there could be no question about how the Mormons voted (“in case you should want any help”) when Clay became president.¹²

The Council of the Twelve Apostles—together with Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and Nauvoo city marshal John P. Green—met in the Nauvoo mayor’s office on Monday, January 29, 1844. The men recommended “that we have independent electors and that Joseph Smith be a candidate for the next presidency [of the United States] and that we use all honorable means to secure his election.” The motion passed unanimously.¹³

“To accomplish this you must send every man in the city who [can] speak through the land to electioneer,” Joseph advised the assembled body, to give “stump speeches—[about the] Mormon religion—election Laws &c &c.” Men would campaign in their home states, he said. Elder Erastus Snow would be assigned to Vermont; counselor Sidney Rigdon would return to Pennsylvania.¹⁴

“After the April [church] conference we will have general conferences all over the nation and I will attend them,” Smith pledged. The message would be simple. “Tell the people we have had Whig[s] and Democrats [as] Presidents long enough.” The Mormons could not support Henry Clay because “The Whigs [were] striving for a king under the garb of Democracy.” By advocating a nonpartisan platform Joseph was defying the current political order. “We want a president of the United States,” he said. “If I ever get in the Presidential chair I will protect the people in their rights and liberties. I will not electioneer for myself,” Joseph determined, following the lead of Henry Clay and other presidential hopefuls. Others must go. “There is oratory enough in the church to carry me into the Presidential chair the first slide.” Victory was certain.¹⁵

Next day, a visitor from Quincy toasted the prophet-candidate: “May all your enemies be skined [sic], their skins made into drum heads for your friends to beat upon. Also may Nauvoo become the empire seat of government.”¹⁶

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¹². John F. Cowan to Joseph Smith, Jr., 28 January 1844, LDS Archives. See also Picklesimer, “To Campaign or Not to Campaign: Henry Clay’s Speaking Tour through the South,” 235–42 and Remini, Henry Clay, 634.

¹³. Smith, American Prophet’s Record 443 [29 January 1844]. See also Willard Richards to James Arlington Bennet, 4 March 1844, in Smith, History of the Church 6:231–33.

¹⁴. Ibid.

¹⁵. Ibid., spelling modernized.

¹⁶. Ibid., 443–44 [29 January 1844]. See also George Rockwell [to his parents], 3 August 1844, in Hallwas and Launius, Cultures in Conflict, 234–37.
The prophet’s campaign quickly took shape. W. W. Phelps was instructed to compose “an address to the paper,” clarifying Smith’s “views on the powers and policy of the Government of [the] United States &c.” A draft of the document was completed in early February. The troublesome municipal ordinances, “Extra case of Joseph Smith” and “unlawful search and seizure of person and property in Nauvoo,” were repealed.17

On February 6, Joseph and his advisers drew up a document outlining a new government of the United States. A presidential cabinet was appointed, House and Senate seats were assigned, governorships were allocated. All were to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph’s public pronouncements were careful not to reveal the full extent of his radical vision for a new political order.18

A campaign meeting was held in the assembly room above Joseph’s store two days later. There “Bro[ther] Phelps publicly read [his] views of the Gen[eral] Gov-ernment for the first time.” General Smith’s Views, as the document came to be known, advocated giving the president powers to intervene in the internal affairs of individual states, when necessary to preserve civil liberties; a more economical federal government by reducing the size of Congress and cutting congressional pay; the abolishishment of slavery by 1850, with compensation to former slaveholders to be paid by the federal government from proceeds arising from the sale of public lands; the pardoning of prisoners currently being held in state penitentiaries and the cre-ation of public works projects for convicts; the establishment of a national bank with branches in each state and territory as well as a uniform currency; receiving Texas, Oregon, and other potential territories into the Union; and electing a nonpartisan president who recognized the power of the people as sovereign.19

Within the church the document was praised as “big with meaning and interest, clearly pointing out the way for the temporal salvation of this Union, shewing what would be our best policy, pointing out the rocks and quicksand where the political bark is in danger of being wrecked, and the way to escape it and evincing a knowl-edge and foresight of our political economy.”20

After the campaign meeting the prophet spoke publicly about some of the rea-sons why he allowed his name to be presented as a candidate for the presidency of the

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17. Ibid., 444 [29 January 1844], 445 [5 and 8 February 1844], 445 [10 February 1844], 446 [12 Febru-ary 1844]. This decision was due, in part, to receipt of a letter from the governor of Illinois. See Thomas Ford to citizens of Hancock County, 29 January 1844, in Times and Seasons 5:443–44.

18. Unsigned document dated 6 February 1844, LDS Archives, cited in Godfrey, “Causes of Confl ict,” 65, note 85. Godfrey wrote, “Not only was he [Joseph Smith] ordained a king but the leading mem-bers of the Church were assigned governmental responsibilities . . . This document is not signed but lists all of the various officers and officials in this new government.” Sylvester Emmons and the Reformers knew of this movement. See “Introductory,” Nauvoo Expositor, 10 June 1844.

19. Smith, American Prophet’s Record, 445 [8 February 1844]. The publication history of Joseph Smith’s Views can be found in Crawley, A Descriptive Bibliography, 240, 244–47, 254, 257–61, 309–11. Views was the most widely reprinted work associated with Mormonism before the great exodus to Utah in 1846. In addition to the original document, there are several useful summaries and partial transcriptions, including Fulness of Times, 270–71, G. Homer Durham, Joseph Smith: Prophet-Statesman, 144–67, and Smith, History of the Church 6:197–209.

20. Times and Seasons 5:441, in Smith, History of the Church 6:211.
United States. “I would not have suffered my name to have been used by my friends on anywise as President of the United States, or candidate for that office,” he said, “if I and my friends could have had the privilege of enjoying our religious and civil rights as American citizens, even those rights which the Constitution guarantees unto all her citizens alike.” Joseph’s decision to run was strategic. “But this as a people we have been denied from the beginning. Persecution has rolled upon our heads from time to time, from portions of the United States, like peals of thunder, because of our religion; and no portion of the Government as yet has stepped forward for our relief.” That inaction left Joseph no choice, he claimed. “In view of these things, I feel it to be my right and privilege to obtain what influence and power I can, lawfully, in the United States, for the protection of injured innocence; and if I lose my life in a good cause I am willing to be sacrificed on the altar of virtue, righteousness and truth, in maintaining the laws and Constitution of the United States, if need be, for the general good of mankind.” The new third-party candidate had stepped boldly into the fray.21

News of Joseph’s momentous political decision soon spread beyond the Mormon stronghold of Nauvoo. Thomas Gregg withdrew as editor of the *Warsaw Message*, reportedly because of an “inability to make payments on the [printing] establishment.” Gregg moved to Rock Island, in the northern part of the state, to work as an assistant editor of the *Upper Mississippian*, a newspaper “firmly and decidedly Whig!” dedicated to advocating “with enthusiasm, and with all the ability with which we are capable, the election of HENRY CLAY to the Presidency of the United States.” Even at a distance, Gregg remained fully informed of events in Hancock County. His brother James lived in Warsaw. In the spring Gregg’s sister-in-law would marry Franklin Worrell, Carthage militiaman, local business leader, and assistant postmaster.22

The last issue of the *Warsaw Message* under Gregg, dated February 7, 1844, concluded with a premonition of increased conflict with the Mormons. In “A Word of Parting to Brother Joe,” Gregg warned, “If the vengeance of the law shall not overtake you, and stretch you up as quick as lightning to the gallows, and thus end your career, rest assured that individual vengeance will!” A poem by a Nauvoo insider, “Buckey’s Lamentation for Want of More Wives,” exposed Joseph’s “secret doctrine” of polygamy which “in public they deny.” The paper also contained notice of an “Anti-Mormon Meeting” to take place three days later “at the Church in Warsaw.” It was signed by Thomas C. Sharp, William N. Grover, and Henry Stephens.

Attorney Thomas Sharp proposed to resuscitate the *Warsaw Signal* (which he had published before Gregg took over the paper and renamed it the *Message*), “believing that the head of the Mormon church is capable of any outrage, which can secure for him supremacy over our county.” Thomas Sharp was twenty-two when he established his legal practice in Warsaw in 1840. Unable to properly represent clients


due to a hearing problem, within months of his arrival he purchased the *Western World* newspaper from David N. White and renamed it the *Warsaw Signal*. Sharp’s anti-Mormon outlook was formed in early 1841 when he perceived that the Mormons had begun to move beyond “the proper sphere of a religious denomination, and become a political body.” He disapproved of the special powers granted Nauvoo by the Illinois legislature and was moved to action when he witnessed the Nauvoo Legion parade in full splendor. Sharp felt “bound to oppose the concentration of political power in a religious body, or in the hands of a few individuals.”

To broaden his base of support, the new *Signal* was to be a “neutral sheet” of a nonpartisan aspect. Sharp had never been a fervent Whig or Democrat. Instead, his energies were focused on what he perceived to be the greater enemy, the rising tide of Mormonism. “On political topics, so far as they are of a party character, we will be silent . . . We have a common cause, and we want a common advocate.” Sharp began publication of the revitalized *Signal* on February 14, 1844.

The first public notice of Joseph Smith’s presidential candidacy appeared a day later, in the February 15 issue of the *Times and Seasons*. An editorial, “Who Shall be Our Next president?” posed the question as a matter of vital importance to the Mormons.

In the event of either of the prominent candidates, Van Buren or Clay, obtaining the presidential chair, we should not be placed in any better situation [than we are at present]. In speaking of Mr. Clay, his politics are diametrically opposed to ours; he inclines strongly to the old school of federalists, and as a matter of course, would not favor our cause, neither could we conscientiously vote for him. And we have yet stronger objections to Mr. Van Buren, on other grounds. He has sung the old song of Congress—Congress has no power to redress your grievances.”

The editor of *Times and Seasons*, John Taylor, had been informed of rumors of an “understanding” reached between Democratic senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri and former president Martin Van Buren, that if Benton used his influence to elect Van Buren in 1844, Van Buren would wipe away the stain from Missouri, by a further persecution of the Mormons. “Under these circumstances,” Taylor continued,

the question again arises, who shall we support? GENERAL JOSEPH SMITH—A man of sterling worth and integrity and of enlarged views—a man who has raised himself from the humblest walks in life to stand at the head of a large, intelligent, respectable, and increasing society, that has spread not only in this land, but in distant nations—a man whose talents and genius are of an exalted nature, and whose experience has rendered him every way adequate to the onerous duty. Honorable, fearless, and energetic, he would administer justice with an impartial hand, and magnify, and dignify the office of Chief Magistrate of this land; and we feel assured that there is not a man in the United States more competent for the task.

... Whatever may be the opinions of men in general, in regard to Mr. Smith, we know that he need only to be known, to be admired; and that it is the principles of honor, integrity, patriotism, and philanthropy, that has elevated him in the minds of his friends, and the same principles if seen and known, would beget the esteem and confidence of all the patriotic and virtuous throughout the Union.

Whatever therefore be the opinions of other men our course is marked out, and our motto from henceforth will be—General Joseph Smith. 25

*General Smith’s Views* issued from the press on February 24. Fifteen hundred copies of the twelve-page pamphlet were printed. Next day, a Sunday, a special prayer meeting (“over the store”) petitioned that “Gen[eral] Smith’s views. . . . might be spread far and wide and be the means of opening the hearts of the people.” Early the following week some two hundred copies of his *Views* were mailed to “the President and Cabinet, Supreme [Court] Judges,” which would have included Judge John McLean, “Senators, Representatives, principal papers in the U.S. all the Governors, and many postmasters and individuals.” 26

The atmosphere in Nauvoo was optimistic. The *Nauvoo Neighbor* and *Times and Seasons* advised their readers:

The step that we have taken is a bold one, and requires our united efforts, perseverance, and diligence. . . . Some have nominated Henry Clay, some Colonel Johnson, others John C. Calhoun, others Daniel Webster, and others Martin Van Buren. . . . if others think they have made the wisest selection, so do we. If others think they have nominated the greatest statesman, so do we; and while those several committees think that none of the nominations made are so good as their own, we think that the man of our choice is the most able, the most competent, the best qualified, and would fill the Presidential chair with greater dignity to the nation; and that his election would be conducive of more happiness and prosperity at home and abroad, than that of any other man in these United States.

This is a thing that we, as Latter-day Saints, know, and it now devolves upon us, as an imperative duty, to make others acquainted with the same things, and to use all our influence at home, and abroad, for the accomplishment of this object.

Mr. Smith is not so generally known personally as are several of the above-named candidates, and although he has been much spoken of as man, he has been a great deal calumniated and misrepresented, and his true character is very little known. It is for us to take away this false coloring; and by lecturing, by publishing, and circulating his works, his political views, his honor, integrity, and virtue, to stop the

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The Prophet (New York City). “For President, Gen. Joseph Smith, of
Nauvoo, Illinois. For Vice President, Sidney Rigdon, of Pennsylva-
nia.” This cut appeared in The Prophet between June 8 and Novem-
ber 2, 1844. Storm clouds (ERROR) with rays of sunlight breaking
through (VERITAS or “truth”) and the words SUPER HANC
PETRAM AEDIFICABO (“upon this rock I will build”) below. The
phrase is taken from the Latin translation of Matthew 16:18: Tu
es petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam (“Thou
art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church”). The play
on words by The Prophet is no doubt intentional, extending the
phrase’s meaning to include the ancient heritage of Freemasonry as
well as Joseph Smith’s efforts to establish the political Kingdom of
God on the earth.
foul mouth of slander, and present him before the public in his own colors, that he may be known, respected, and supported.27

Springfield’s Whig newspaper, the *Sangamo Journal*, was one of the first newspapers outside of Hancock County to respond to Joseph’s candidacy. The editor followed G. T. M. Davis’s admonition to give the Mormons as little press coverage as possible. “Gen. Joseph Smith, of the Nauvoo Legion, is announced in the Nauvoo paper, as a candidate for President of the United States,” it reported without comment or flourish. “Another candidate for the presidency has entered the field,” Iowa’s *Lee County Democrat* reported. “We have not learnt whether he intends to submit his claims to a [Democratic or Whig] National Convention, or whether he will run upon his own hook.”28

The *People’s Organ* of St. Louis did not take the prophet’s campaign seriously. “Gen. Joseph Smith, priest, prophet, military leader (we had almost said king) among the Mormons, is out as candidate for President of the United States. There is no joke in the matter—Gen. Jo received seven votes for President on board of a steamboat the other day; shouldn’t wonder if he beat Tyler.” *Niles’ National Register* also announced, again somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “A New Candidate in the Field! Stand out of the way—all small fry.” The Democratic *Illinois State Register* struck out at the Whigs where they were the weakest by declaring that General Joseph Smith “ought to be regarded as the true Whig candidate for president, until Mr. Clay can so far recover from this shuffling and dodging.”29

In Nauvoo, Joseph contemplated the selection of a running mate. His Anointed Quorum met to consider the matter. This body, organized over the fall and winter of 1843–44, was composed of selected Nauvoo Mormons (about sixty men and women, most of them husbands and wives) who earlier had received their own endowments. The Mormon endowment was a sacred ritual composed of an anointing, promises, keys, and sealings unto eternal life tied to an individual’s faithfulness in keeping the commandments of God. These endowed individuals were then further blessed with a “second anointing” (the Holy Spirit of Promise or “calling and election made sure”) that guaranteed their exaltation with God the Father and Jesus Christ in the world to come. Joseph was sustained as the body’s president and king.30

The Anointed Quorum chose James Arlington Bennet (a baptized, though un-publicized, Mormon), proprietor of Long Island’s Arlington House, to run as vice

29. “New Candidate,” *People’s Organ [St. Louis]*, 6 March 1844. “A new Candidate in the Field! Stand out of the way—all small fry,” *Niles’ National Register*, 2 March 1844. “Gen. Joseph Smith a Candidate for President,” *Illinois State Register*, 15 March 1844, in Smith, *History of the Church* 6:268. Godfrey, “Causes of Conflict,” 66–67, claims, “At about the same time [early March of 1844] a meeting was held in Carthage by a group of political leaders in which they plotted and planned the assassination of the Prophet should he become a real political threat in terms of the United States presidency.” He lists no sources. More than likely Godfrey is referring to the Hamilton Hotel meeting of 26 June 1844. See Chapter Thirteen for details of this meeting.
Willard Richards advised Arlington Bennet to embark on a political mission. “Commence at your own mansion and stay not, only for electioneering purposes, till by some popular route you reach Nauvoo; and if you preach Mormonism it will help you. At every stage, tavern, boat and company, expose the wickedness of Martinism in saying, if he is elected President, he will annihilate the Mormons, and proclaim the sycophancy of the candidates generally, and uphold Joseph against every aspersion and you shall triumph gloriously.” There would be a special conference at Nauvoo on April 6. “From that period our Elders will go forth by hundreds or thousands and search the land, preaching religion and politics; and if God goes with them, who can withstand their influence?”

In early March, word was received that James Arlington Bennet was apparently not a native-born American and therefore ineligible to run for the vice presidency. Even so, Bennet’s name appeared as Joseph’s running mate in the March 6 issue of the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. The Quorum of the Anointed was again convened and

nominated Colonel Solomon Copeland, a non-Mormon living in Paris, Tennessee, for the vice presidential position. His solicitation, too, would be unsuccessful.  

At a meeting of the Nauvoo Temple Committee on Thursday, March 7, W. W. Phelps read aloud General Smith’s Views. The body voted “unanimously, with one exception, to uphold General Smith for the Presidency of the United States.” The single dissenting vote was cast by Charles A. Foster (brother of Dr. Robert Foster), accused by the prophet of writing “some of the most disgraceful things possible to name” to Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune. The two men engaged in a verbal sparring match until Joseph threatened to fine him for disturbing the meeting and using menacing language.  

John Taylor spoke to the gathering that afternoon. “Of General Joseph Smith some are afraid, and think it doubtful about his election,” he said, “and, like the ostrich, stick their heads under a bush, and leave their bodies out, so that we can all see them; and after this it will be a by-word—’That man is an ostrich who hides his head in this cause.’ Taylor’s message was clear: every Mormon must support Joseph’s candidacy or be subject to public ridicule.  

Joseph maintained the political theme in his remarks. “As to politics, I care but little about the presidential chair,” he said. “I would not give half as much for the office of President of the United States as I would for the one I now hold as Lieutenant-General of the Nauvoo Legion.” Indeed, by virtue of a commission signed by the governor of Illinois, the Mormon prophet was the first man since George Washington to hold that venerated military rank. Political meetings nearly always referred to the prophet as “General Joseph Smith.”  

Smith argued that political activism was completely in keeping with his function as a religious leader, in part because it was a means to an end, namely the preservation of the rights of the Latter-day Saints. “We have as good a right to make a political party to gain power to defend ourselves, as for demagogues to make use of our religion to get power to destroy us,” he continued. “In other words, as the world has used the power of government to oppress and persecute us, it is right for us to use it for the protection of our rights. We will whip the mob by getting up a candidate for President. When I get hold of the Eastern papers, and see how popular I am, I am afraid myself that I shall be elected; but if I should be, I would not say, ‘Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you.”  

Martin Van Buren’s thinly disguised disdain would become the catalyst for Joseph’s most radical proposal yet put before the Latter-day Saints.