Chapter Sixteen

“Bound by common guilt and danger to commit almost any act to save them from infamy”

Anxious to return to their homes in Carthage and Warsaw, the Old Citizens of Hancock County slogged through the muddy roads rendered nearly impassable by the overflowing banks of the Mississippi River. The high water mark had been reached on June 27, nearly a week before. That was the day the settlers abandoned their homes, fleeing the anticipated invasion by Nauvoo’s twelve thousand outraged Mormons, who were expected to burn Carthage and Warsaw to the ground in retaliation for the murder of their leaders. The returning citizens found their homesteads intact. An uneasy calm prevailed amidst the prospect of continued violence.

Within days of the event, the Carthage conspiracy nearly collapsed under the press of its own weight. To begin with, the anti-Mormons could not agree on what public face to put on the murders. When members of the Warsaw Committee returned from their exhausting propaganda campaign, they were outraged to read the Warsaw Signal Extra of June 29. The Carthage incident had been reported under “Events of the Week.”

About four o’clock p.m., a company of about one hundred armed men, marched to the jail in Carthage, and demanded the prisoners. A rush was made on the guards, who fired, but hurt nobody. They were immediately secured, and the men rushed up stairs to the room of the prisoners. For about two minutes the discharge of fire arms within the jail was very rapid. Finally, Joe Smith raised the *window, exclaimed “Oh my God,” and threw himself out. He fell heavily on the ground, and was soon dispatched. Hiram was shot in the jail. There were two other prisoners, Dr. Richards, who we learn was not hurt, and J. Taylor, editor of the Nauvoo Neighbor, who received five balls, in his arms and legs. Immediately on the work being done, the men fled . . .

*the prisoners were not in cells, but in the private room of the jailor, the windows of which were not barred.

Runners sent to Quincy, St. Louis, and elsewhere along the Mississippi told a very different story, namely that the deaths were caused by the Mormons themselves when they attempted to deliver their prophet and his brother from the confines of Carthage jail. The militia had no choice, the messengers said, but to shoot the escaping prisoners.

One Warsaw Committee member charged that “Sharp ought to have sworn” to the fabrication; instead, Sharp had “told the truth in his paper.” This unauthorized disclosure would make it much more difficult to hide the involvement of the Warsaw militia and Thomas Ford’s collusion in the affair.4

Sharp never apologized for his indiscretion; his motivation for publishing the true circumstances surrounding the murders would forever remain unclear. It is possible that he recognized, given the large number of witnesses, that the main facts in the case were bound to be publicly disclosed perhaps even in court. He simply chose not to wait. As the weeks wore on, and no arrest warrants were issued, Sharp became even bolder in his public statements and went so far as to justify the killings of the Mormon leaders as a military-style “summary execution” that had been decided upon days before the actual event. Those familiar with military law would have understood Sharp’s statement as applying to situations in which prisoners under arrest could be dispatched if it was determined they might flee or otherwise escape justice. Few in the county would disagree with him.5

“My dear Friends,” Onias C. Skinner wrote to attorneys Calvin A. Warren and Almeron Wheat of Quincy on July 8. Skinner, a Carthage lawyer, was aide-de-camp to Brigadier General Deming and master in chancery of the Carthage Circuit Court, two positions which afforded him unparalleled access to valuable intelligence. Skinner was one of the men who had served on a Carthage Committee delegation to Governor Ford before the arrest of Joseph and Hyrum, and was a prosecuting attorney during the hearings in Carthage the day prior to their deaths. Skinner (who would move to Quincy in December) informed his associates that he couldn’t leave Hancock County for some time. “I took a trip to the country the other day,” he said, “and found some of the Mormons well pleased that the Smiths were gone; others were sullen as ‘grim visaged death.’” He warned his colleagues to be very careful in their efforts to influence the coming elections. Warren and Wheat were both Democrats, confederates of Governor Ford, whose military headquarters were being maintained in Quincy. Skinner was an independent member of the political coalition opposed to the Mormons and moved easily between the Whig and Democratic camps. “We must move cautiously with an honest cry to the August election,” Skinner cautioned. “But no intriguing with us.” The previous weeks had seen enough intrigue to last several lifetimes. Still, a critical election was just weeks away and had to be won. Just who


5. [Thomas Sharp editorial] Warsaw Signal, 10 July 1844, quoted in Bitton, Martyrdom Remembered, 58, note 9. I would like to thank Gordon C. Thomasson for pointing out the significance of this statement. Similarly, Davis, Authentic Account, 17, noted, “They were determined the Smiths should not escape summary punishment.” George Rockwell to Thomas H. Rockwell, 3 August 1844, believed that those opposed to Joseph Smith were obligated to “execute justice.” (Hallwas and Launius, Cultures in Conflict, 237).
would win was not yet certain.6

Joseph Smith’s followers, although factionalized over the succession question and polygamy, remained a potent political force that had to be confronted and manipulated. The impending August election would select state and local officials as well as determine who would serve as representatives to the U.S. Congress in 1844–45. It was widely viewed as a litmus test for the November presidential vote.

Whom would the Mormons support? The answer depended upon who was thought to be behind the assassination of their prophet and patriarch. If the governor was implicated, then the Mormons were likely to go with Whig candidates. If the Whigs were charged with being behind the crime, Mormon support for the Democrats would be strengthened.

Many Mormons accused the Missourians of backing the conspiracy. The Avery “kidnap” drama was still fresh in many minds and highlighted the ever-present danger lurking just across the Mississippi River. Certainly, the Missourians had reason to continue hounding the Latter-day Saints. Governor Boggs’s 1838 “extermination order” was still in effect. (It would take until 1976 for Missouri to rescind the edict.) And, it was widely believed that Joseph Smith was behind an 1842 murder attempt against Boggs. The Mormons could also point to the large numbers of volunteer gunmen seen crossing the Mississippi just hours before (and after) the assassination.

The Mormons firmly believed that Illinois’s Democratic governor was in league with the assassins. Evidence for his involvement was common knowledge. When Ford departed for Nauvoo around noon on the June 27, it was argued, he knew full well what would occur. If that was not so, why hadn’t he brought Joseph with him to Nauvoo, as promised? And how was it that Ford understood the significance of the alarm guns and was so quick to depart from Nauvoo after his derogatory speech?

The existence of a Missouri-backed Democratic conspiracy was proclaimed from the very moment the news of Joseph and Hyrum’s demise arrived in Nauvoo. The near-universal condemnation of the governor, and by implication the Democrats of Illinois and Missouri, meant that the Mormon leadership at Nauvoo for all intents and purposes overlooked the Whigs as possible suspects in the murders. It was a blind spot the partisans of Henry Clay would use to great advantage.7

“All is perfect peace at Nauvoo,” Carthage survivor Willard Richards wrote to Abraham Jonas on July 10. Jonas was a noted Illinois Whig and past grand master of the Illinois Masonic Lodge. It was Jonas who had made Joseph a Mason at sight in 1842, and it was he who stood up for the Nauvoo Lodge when the Illinois Grand Lodge withdrew its charter. The Mormons, Richards told Jonas, were “calmly waiting the fulfilment of Governor Ford’s pledge to redeem the land from blood by legal process. You can do much to allay the excitement of the country in your travels, and the friends of peace will appreciate your labors.” Richards thanked Jonas for his “endeavors for the promotion of truth and justice.” He was referring to Jonas’s travels throughout the Military Tract on behalf of the governor. A week or so earlier

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7. See, for example, John Hardy [Boston] to The Prophet, 26 July 1844, in The Prophet, 3 August 1844: “Governor Ford was one of the main wire-pullers of the damnable deed.”
Jonas had delivered an abrasive speech to the people of Warsaw—given onshore while keeping a small skiff close at hand just in case the inhabitants rushed him.

Jonas would have found Willard Richards’s words doubly ironic, as they were unknowingly addressed to the man who provided the press used to print the Nauvoo Expositor, thereby precipitating the downfall of the Mormon prophet. Additionally, Richards did not know that Jonas, on the evening of June 27—under the guise of a Quincy Whig political meeting—had organized a band of Adams County militiamen in preparation for a planned march against Nauvoo the day after the murders. Jonas was careful to do nothing that would disabuse the Mormons of their trust in him. After all, at the time Jonas was running for a seat in Illinois’s Fourteenth General Assembly and doubtless hoped to parlay his own Mormon support into a Latter-day Saint vote for Henry Clay in November. In one more seemingly effortless maneuver, Jonas winningly fulfilled his duties to the governor, the Mormons, and to his party. Whig involvement in the Carthage conspiracy would remain safe from Mormon cries for vengeance.8

Outside of Nauvoo, the coalition of Whigs and Democrats engaged in the conspiracy strained confidences and traditional allegiances. Some were bound to talk. A few did.

When Governor Ford departed Carthage for Nauvoo at noon on June 27 he left Brigadier General Minor Deming in charge at the county seat. Ford fully expected that Deming would make a valiant effort to protect the Smiths from harm; indeed, the Brigadier General was one of the few militia officers who did not know Ford and the Greys were accomplices in the plot to murder the Smiths. And, if Deming lost his life in the process of protecting the Smiths, Ford would have conveniently (and without personal risk) rid himself of one more annoyance.

Deming had become a thorn in the side of the governor and the anti-Mormon coalition even before the fatal assault on the jail. It should be recalled that when Deming showed the Mormon prisoners the proper honor to be accorded officers in the state militia, the Carthage Greys turned against him. Deming also became a target simply because he knew too much.

It was Deming, who, “long before breakfast” on the morning of June 27, had informed his commander in chief (the governor), “that there was going to be an attempt made to rescue the Smiths out of jail and visit summary punishment upon them.” Deming was reliably informed that “it was the Whigs that intended to do it.” Anxious to protect the Whigs (who were shielding him from discovery as well), Ford dismissed this damning intelligence and would later deny that Deming ever made such a statement.9

In his largely autobiographical History of Illinois, completed in 1846, Ford also misrepresented Deming’s actions that fateful afternoon. “General Deming, who was


9. G. T. M. Davis to Thomas Ford, 9 August 1844, in Illinois State Register, 8 November 1844.
left in command,” Ford wrote, “being deserted by some of his troops, and perceiving the arrangement with the others, and having no force upon which he could rely, for fear of his life retired from the village.” Ford’s motivation for maligning Deming no doubt was to place blame for the murders at least partially on the Brigadier General’s shoulders. At the same time, Ford inadvertently acknowledged that the murders were not the result of a spontaneous uprising of disbanded militiamen, as was commonly reported, but the culmination of an “arrangement” earlier entered into. That Ford knew more than he let on is further confirmed by his own admission (again in his History) that on the afternoon of June 27 when Colonel Buckmaster warned him of a planned attack on the jail, Ford said he “entertained no suspicion of such an attack; at any rate, none before the next day in the afternoon.” Ford obviously knew about the conspiracy to murder the Mormon leaders; the onslaught simply occurred earlier than he had expected.10

Furthermore, contrary to Ford’s rendering of Brigadier General Deming’s supposed fainthearted withdrawal from Carthage, the truth of the matter was that Deming fully expected to leave for Quincy on the afternoon of June 27 in order to attend the funeral of his brother Edwin, who had been killed by lightning earlier in the week. After putting his troops under the command of a junior officer, Deming returned to his home to prepare for his departure. He was told of the killings a short time after they occurred.11

Deming’s response to the murders is more revealing than Ford’s attempt to disparage his character. Deming was one of only a handful of non-Mormon residents of Hancock County who considered the killing of Joseph Smith to be “a ferocious and fiendish murder.” In his search for the truth surrounding the assassination, Deming discovered that the guards posted at the jail had loaded their guns with blank cartridges, firm evidence pointing to complicity on the part of the Carthage and Warsaw troops.12

Newspaperman George T. M. Davis, the chief Illinois Whig leader shielding Ford from public exposure, sought to limit the potentially harmful effects of Deming’s intelligence. Davis, like Ford, unwittingly confirms Deming’s story. “I have hitherto said but little in regard to Gen. Deming,” Davis wrote in a widely circulated account of the assassination. “My reason for this is, I had no confidence whatever in him, from the attempts which I knew he was constantly making while I remained in Carthage.” Davis’s remarks refer to the morning of June 27; he left town with Governor Ford around noon that day and never returned to the county seat. Davis was apprehensive because Deming had attempted “to give this unfortunate affair a political turn, and to impress upon the minds of his superiors, that the Whigs were the prime movers through the whole of it. And as he had not succeeded in making any body believe

his silly, foolish story, had failed in what I regarded a dishonorable scheme for selfish purposes.” Davis never tells his readers what he believed Deming’s ulterior motive to be. And, of course, Davis fails to reveal his own motivation for protecting the governor, a sworn political enemy. As we shall see, their alliance would be short-lived.13

A week after the Carthage massacre, Deming informed the governor that he knew his own life was in danger. “The mob subsequent to their butchering the prisoners took a vote to murder myself and others, those who would not sustain them.” Unaware that Thomas Ford himself was a conspirator in the affair, Deming cautioned him that threats of Mormon vengeance also continued to circulate, on account of the governor’s “strident” Nauvoo speech and claims that he was a party to the murders. “It is necessary for the honor of the State and the vindication of your character that the truth in this matter should be fully known.” While certainly desirous of having his character restored, Ford had no wish to open a full investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths.14

Deming’s devotion to principle, together with his law and order approach to justice, led the Mormons to support his candidacy for Hancock County sheriff in the August elections. In late August the newly elected sheriff wrote to his family in the east. Matters in Hancock County were still unsettled, Deming informed them. “The exterminators are of the two, more fanatical than the Mormons and less regardful of the law,” he wrote. “They threaten death of all who have enough daring or humanity to oppose them . . . The Mormon question since the murder of the Smiths has become political and the venum [sic] of party spirit breathes in detraction. There were some 2 or 300 engaged in the murder and they with their friends and alliance of the Whig party in the county, who mean to sustain and protect the murderers, make a strong party that by threats, violence & desperation aim at supremacy above the law and justice.” Deming’s moral stand against the Whig alliance would eventually cost him his life.15

Press coverage of the murders was hampered by poor communication. And yet, it, too, quickly turned political. Each party accused the other of provoking the Carthage incident. As late as the Fourth of July, Springfield’s Whig newspaper, the Sangamo Journal, reported it was “unable to state anything very definite in relation to affairs at Nauvoo” and the surrounding countryside. “Rumor says . . . that on Thursday of last week Joe Smith, Hyram Smith, and Dr. Richards were shot by a mob [at] Carthage.” The Whig editor was skeptical about how the governor could have “placed them in a situation where they would be murdered. The rumor is too preposterous for belief.”

The Democratic Illinois State Register lost no time in responding. “The Journal of yesterday, in that dastardly spirit for which its controllers are remarkable, intimates that Gov. Ford received Jos. Smith and Hir. Smith as prisoners, pledged himself for their protection, and then placed them in a situation where they would

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be murdered!” The *Journal* article was all partisan politics, insisted the Register.

What opinion will the public form of a party, whose leading editor feigns disbelief in the murder of the Smiths, for the purpose of stabbing indirectly the honor of the State, through the bosom of its Chief Magistrate? and this, too, for a party purpose, as is plainly manifest on the face of the dastardly article itself—that purpose being to induce the Mormons to vote with the Whigs. To obtain their votes, the Journal indirectly invents an infamous lie, which lie stabs the public faith, and blackens the honor of the State.

Major Edward D. Baker, an Illinois Whig running for U.S. Congress to replace John J. Hardin, had just arrived in Springfield. “We hope the Major has not suffered his personal difficulties with the Governor to poison his mind so far as to communicate the substance of the article which appears in the *Journal*, to its editor,” the Register continued. “An editor who would make such a charge, would not be too good to blacken his face and join the band of midnight assassins who murdered Smith.”

In the northern part of the state, the Democratic *Galena Sentinel* and the Whig *Upper Mississippian* were likewise engaged in political combat. The *Sentinel* struck the first blow:

Since the foul murder of the Smiths by the Anti-Mormons, many of the Whig electioneers are boasting that Sweet [a Whig] will beat Hoge [the Democratic incumbent] in the Congressional District. A gentleman who was at Camp meeting last Sunday heard them endeavoring to make capitol even on the Sabbath, out of this foul stain on our State! It would appear that the leaders of the Whig party, by their letters printed, first agitated the question which has resulted so lawlessly—all for political effect and are doing their best to implicate Gov. Ford as conniving in the murders.

Thomas Gregg, assistant editor of the *Upper Mississippian*, responded with relish. “It has seldom been our fortune to notice a meaner and more reckless attempt to make political capital, than is displayed in the above,” he replied. Gregg reminded the editor of the *Sentinel* that he had been a citizen of Hancock County “long before the Mormons settled in it, and know a thousand times more about her local affairs.” Gregg knew more than he would ever tell. Gregg was in regular communication with the Nauvoo dissidents; his brother James first carried the news of the Carthage murders to Warsaw; his brother-in-law, Frank Worrell, was in charge of the guard at the time of the assault. And, Gregg’s support for Henry Clay was widely known.

Gregg pronounced the charge against the Whigs “a vile slander!” At the same time he readily acknowledged that “the best men of both parties [Whig and Democrat] . . . have been for years steadily endeavoring to check the mad ambition, and slay the reckless career, of the Mormon leader. And had their laudable endeavor been seconded as they deserved to be . . . the melancholy tragedy would have never taken

place.” Gregg pressed on by insisting that “the idea that the Whigs charge Gov. Ford with conniving at the murders, is just so much stupid flammery.” Gregg’s closing words turned the table on the Democrats. “Let such politicians as the editor of the Sentinel hold their peace about these Mormon difficulties. Their conduct brought these disasters upon us. It is they who have brought this stain upon our State and her institutions.”

For the most part, newspapers outside of Illinois simply reproduced articles originally written from Nauvoo, Warsaw, Quincy, St. Louis, and Alton, supplying little commentary beyond condemnation of the affair. Some even applauded the action. A Tennessee Whig editor exclaimed, “Smith was killed, as he should have been. THREE CHEERS to the brave company who shot him to pieces!”

One of the few editors to acknowledge the role Joseph Smith’s presidential bid played in his untimely death was William Ogden Niles, Baltimore publisher of the independent Niles’ National Register. “Alas for human greatness!” his editorial began. “One of the nominated candidates for the next presidency is already a lifeless corpse.” He offered no sympathy, expressed no remorse, no condemnation of the perpetrators.

Niles pointed immediately to Joseph’s political activism, introducing the topic with a mocking portrayal of the Mormon prophet. “Even the sanctity of his high profession as a prophet and a leader, could not preserve him, though performing almost miracles, in deluding thousands to his mystical faith, and detaining them in unaccountable subservience to his will.”

Mormonism, in Niles’ view, perverted the example of righteousness initiated by the Savior: “Notwithstanding the flagrant deviation of [Joseph Smith’s] course from that designated by the meek and lowly pattern [of Jesus Christ] whom he professed to be imitating and serving, who so often and emphatically declared to his disciples, ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’”

Joseph Smith’s political goals, on the other hand, were incredibly ambitious, as the prophet “evidently aspired to a full share [of] the kingdoms of this world,” Niles wrote, “as far, and as fast as he could grasp hold of them . . . Joseph unquestionably indulged some faint hope of extending his rapidly accumulated power, from Nauvoo, to the extremities of the Union, and dreamed even of expanding those limits far beyond what they now are circumscribed to.” Joseph’s plans were well known. “His exposé of what he would do if elected president of the United States, his letters to the several candidates, and his nomination by conventions at Boston and elsewhere, evince that he was determined to make a demonstration for the Capitol and dictatorship.”

The prophet-candidate was brought down, Niles suggested, by the one force he could not control, the press. “Joseph made an attempt . . . like other sovereigns, to regulate the public press, in his dominions . . . Joseph adopted his own method of

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18. William G. Brownlow, Jonesborough [Kentucky] Whig, 24 July 1844, reprinted in Warsaw Signal, 10 February 1845. Quoted in Swinton, American Prophet, 18. This is an example of what Thomas Ford referred to when he wrote, “The whig press in every part of the United States came to their assistance.” (Ford, History of Illinois, in Smith, History of the Church 7:46)
regulating the press, a summary process, and conclusive . . . It was a dangerous nerve to touch, as Joseph soon ascertained."

Now that the Mormon prophet was dead, Niles’s main concern was the recent influx of European converts to Nauvoo, “who, if we are not mistaken, will, most of them, as citizens of Illinois, exercise the privilege of voting on the presidential question, without regard to the U. States naturalization laws.” Niles recognized that securing the Mormon vote (naturalized or not) in the November election remained a priority for Whig and Democrat alike.19

An editorial that originally appeared in a Cincinnati paper was copied by Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune. Joseph Smith’s death, the article asserted, “seems to have been made legally by the guard resisting his forcible attempt to escape, but the popular action against the Mormons will be represented as persecution. The worst part of the Mormon affair we have ever seen, is the atrocious grant by the Illinois Legislature (as we believe for political purposes) of special charters to Nauvoo City and the Nauvoo Legion . . . The difficulty in Illinois and Missouri is in singling the Mormons out as a body to be favored or persecuted according to the political interests or popular prejudices of the day.” Incredibly, the Whig editor was capable of passing from murder to the larger political question in less time than it takes to gasp for breath! Furthermore, the Warsaw Committee’s distorted version of Carthage events was alive and well.20

James Gordon Bennett, Democratic editor of the New York Herald, concurred with the views advanced by the Tribune. It was “political feeling,” he wrote, that “entered largely into the popular excitement in that region against the Mormons.” Bennett then took his claims one step further than most editors were willing to put into print. He laid the conspiracy at the feet of the Whigs, who, he said, “feared . . . that the Nauvoo people would give material aid to Polk. This affords another and most melancholy illustration of the pernicious, demoralizing, brutalizing influence of the party presses,” (of which the Herald was one!), “which are daily inflaming the passions of the people by the vilest and most incendiary tirades against their respective opponents.” Bennett plainly attributed the Carthage tragedy to the political machinations of the Illinois Whig party, which feared the potential impact of the Mormons voting Democratic in the November election.21

Back in Illinois, Whig newspaperman G. T. M. Davis presented his impressions of recent events in Hancock County in a series of on-the-spot letters and editorials published in the Alton Telegraph. In early July he informed his readers that he had just returned to Alton following a ten-day visit to Carthage, Warsaw, Nauvoo, and Quincy “amid the scenes of excitement which existed previous and subsequent to the fatal termination of the Smiths’ earthly career.” He was preparing a history of the Mormon war.22

As a participant-observer with the unprecedented ability to move between opposing camps in the conflict, Davis’s reporting had an immediacy no other journalist

22. “Let Him that is Without Sin Cast the First Stone,” Alton Telegraph, 13 July 1844.
could match. His sources included everyday Mormons, members of Nauvoo’s secretive Council of Fifty, leaders of the Carthage and Warsaw Anti-Mormon Committees, the local and state militia, and, of course, the governor.

Davis completed his history in early July. The work would appear in pamphlet form as *An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, and Hyrum Smith, his brother, together with a brief history of the rise and progress of Mormonism, and all the circumstances which led to their death*. Copies of the booklet were sent to American Whig leaders, including Horace Greeley and Henry Clay.23

More than anything else, Davis’s tract was a propaganda piece. Davis assured his readers, somewhat disingenuously, that his motivation for writing the work was “Actuated by no spirit of partisanship, with either the one side or the other, we were a calm and dispassionate observer, and determined to give the whole facts to the people in an impartial and authentic manner.” At the end of his small treatise, Davis again avows that he had “endeavored to do justice to all parties, and to place their situations fairly before the public . . . This I have done honestly and fearlessly.”24

Contrary to his repeated protestations of impartiality, Davis early on reveals his animosity towards the Mormons. “The founders of the Mormon faith . . . admitted on all hands to be of all absurdities the most absurd . . . imposing their delusions . . . practicing their impositions . . . the chief of imposters, JOE SMITH THE PROPHET.” Davis justified the killing of Joseph and Hyrum as ridding the earth of “two as wickedly depraved men, as ever disgraced the human family.” Impartial and fair he was not.25

As a Whig supporter of Henry Clay, Davis was obligated to do all he could to ensure a Whig victory in November. His efforts to do so occasionally bordered on the extreme. Davis certainly never disguised his support for the men engaged in the extralegal murders. John Bailhache, senior editor of the *Alton Telegraph*, disagreed with Davis’s claims that “the press has been too harsh, in its denunciations of the recent outrage” and that the “ruthless assassins of the Mormon leaders” had an excuse for their drastic actions in the redress of their grievances. “A just sense of our responsibility to the public, would not permit us to say less,” Bailhache concluded, “and the intelligent reader, being now in possession of the views of our respected associate, as well as of our own, we submit the whole matter to his better judgement.”

The editorial disagreement between Bailhache and Davis was not to be construed as applying to “National politics,” however. Baihache insisted: “There is not, it is believed, one single point, however unimportant, on which [we] differ; and such is also the case with our State affairs. In other things, each one is left free to express his own sentiments, subject to a notice of dissent from the other, when thought expedient, as is done in the present number.” Somehow the two men, at least in print, were

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capable of separating Joseph Smith's murder from his political threat to the Whig cause. The separation was more cosmetic than real.26

For the “intelligent reader” of the day, to borrow Bailhache’s phrase, the most unusual aspect of Davis’s pamphlet would have been its unyielding support of Illinois Democratic governor Thomas Ford. The two men were, by all accounts, uncompromising personal and political enemies. Davis’s protection of the governor was governed by one fear, the betrayal and public identification of the men engaged in the murders. Indeed, *Authentic Account* was one of the chief propaganda tools used by the Whigs to shield the participants from discovery. And, later that year, the document would be distributed in the Illinois legislature as part of the ultimately successful Whig effort to repeal the Nauvoo Charter.

After reviewing “all the material facts connected with the riot at Nauvoo, the death of its authors, and the subsequent occurrences up to the 3d of July,” Davis proposed to “notice one or two objections made to the course of the Executive of Illinois, giving his own reasons for that course.” The most serious charge against Governor Ford was that he had promised Joseph and Hyrum Smith protection if they surrendered to state authorities. Davis argued that the governor’s assurance, “was a gratuitous verbal pledge given to the Mormon committee who visited Carthage, and subsequently repeated to the Smiths, after they reached that place, and not made by them previous, a condition of such surrender . . . I maintain, therefore, that the pledge did not extend to their personal safety, upon their surrender, on any other charge, than the one preferred against them for riot.” The protection did not apply when the men were rearrested for treason, Davis asserted. The argument rested on a legal technicality, but the governor had kept his original pledge—according to Davis, at least. He neglected to mention that, two days after the murders, the governor reaffirmed that he had indeed pledged to protect the Smiths from harm.

It was also submitted by some, Davis acknowledged, that the governor, knowing he could not protect the imprisoned leaders, “…should have opened the prison doors, and allowed them to escape.” Davis disagreed. “Had he done this, nothing could have prevented [the Governor’s] impeachment and conviction.” The men were jailed on a charge of treason, “a charge of the most serious character known to our laws.” The governor had acted properly in keeping them in jail because, “The punishment, upon conviction, being death, the accused could not be bailed.” (When it came to the treatment of the men accused of the murders, this legal point would be conveniently disregarded.)

Furthermore, Davis discounted the claim that “Gov. Ford knew the feelings of the Carthage Greys, towards the Smiths.” The evidence usually cited to support that position was the Grey “revolt” on the morning of June 25, when Joseph and Hyrum were paraded before the troops. “But such is not the case,” Davis countered. The enmity “was directed towards Gen. Deming,” Davis concluded: “There is nothing that has been disclosed,” (which in itself says a great deal), “which would have led Gov. Ford to suppose, that the guard he placed at the jail would prove recreant to their trust, and become accomplices in the destruction of the prisoners.” Based upon the

evidence presented in his *Authentic Account* Davis found no wrong in the Democratic governor’s dealings with the Mormons.27

At the time Davis penned his unqualified support for the governor the summer elections were nearly a month away. Just days before the August election a letter from the governor, chastising the people of Warsaw and blaming them for much of the unrest in Hancock County, was sent (inadvertently, it was later claimed) to the people of Nauvoo. In the days leading up the election more than one stump speaker warned that if the Mormons did not vote Democratic the governor would withdraw his protection and support. It was the summer of 1843 all over again.28

Sidney Rigdon, who had recently returned to Nauvoo from Pittsburgh upon hearing of the murders, insisted that the Mormons of Nauvoo exercise their constitutional right. Although many Latter-day Saints were inclined not to vote—the governor had in fact recommended to the Mormon leadership that the Saints abstain from attending the polls altogether—it was believed they had little choice. To begin with, their opponents were running on an “anti-Mormon ticket.” The Mormons were compelled to vote in self-defense. Furthermore, Rigdon argued, “if they did not vote the report would go abroad and be believed throughout the world, that the Mormons had dispersed and abandoned their religion; and that their city had been deserted and broken up; and these reports would seem to be sanctioned by the fact that no votes had been given in Nauvoo.” The message to the world had to be clear and it had to be unifed.29

The election for representatives to the U.S. Congress took place on August 5. In Illinois’ Sixth District, Democrat Joseph P. Hoge received 76 percent of the vote in Hancock County. His overall margin of victory was 52 percent; 45 percent of the vote went to the Whig candidate, and 3 percent to the Liberty party.30

Not surprisingly, Horace Greeley’s *Clay Tribune* reporting of the August election results was headed “The Mormon District in Illinois.” It minced no words. “Hoge, the Loco elected to Congress from the 6th district of Illinois, must be considered the Representative of the Mormons. Hancock County, where Nauvoo, the Mormon city is situated, gave Hoge a majority of 1357. In the remainder of the District . . . the Whig candidate, Sweet, had a majority of 473.” In a effort to cover-up Whig involvement in the murder of Joseph Smith, and with a faint hope of recovering the Mormon vote, the *Clay Tribune* stressed that “the Mormons were told (falsely) that [Whig candidate] Sweet was their bitterest enemy, and had endeavored to justify the mob that had killed their Prophet.” On the contrary, in this the Mormons had been correctly informed.31

Another report, also in the *Clay Tribune*, conceded,

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the State [of Illinois] is Loco-Foco, by about the same majority as the State Election in 1840 . . . They may do better now, but for the present the State may be set down as decidedly Loco. The new Congressional Delegation stands . . . V. Stephen A. Douglass, by a small majority[;] VI. Joseph P. Hoge, over M. P. Sweet, Whig[;] VII. Edward D. Baker, Whig, over John Calhoun[.] All Locos elected, but Mr. Baker, who takes the place of Hon John J. Hardin, [who had] declined [to run]. The Whigs hoped to beat Douglass and Hoge; but Douglass is said to be re-elected by 250, while Hoge is saved by the great Mormon vote cast unanimously for him. The vote of Nauvoo stands Hoge 1275, Sweet twenty! So Mormonism goes the whole hog for Polk, Texas & Co. So we will call Illinois a Polk state until the Whigs carry it for Clay.

Edward D. Baker would now replace John J. Hardin as the only Illinois Whig to serve in the U.S. Congress.32

Hardin had recently returned to his home in Jacksonville. On August 5 (the day of the election), Governor Ford requested that Hardin, a Brigadier General in the state militia, oversee matters in Hancock County while he (Ford) attended a National Democratic Convention in Nashville. Ford planned to be gone for two weeks and thought it proper to “leave some person in charge of the affairs in Hancock County until my return.” Ford warned Hardin that he should be “careful not to adventure any action in a military capacity unless you are well persuaded that you will be sustained thoroughly by the officers and men under your command.”33

This move highlighted Ford’s own difficulties. Ford himself was vulnerable and had become an assassination target. He had unsuccessfully requested the use of U.S. Army troops from Missouri to keep the peace while the accused assassins were rounded up and arrested. When that effort failed, Ford had to rely on the Whigs for assistance.

Hardin, as Henry Clay’s stepnephew, was an ardent Whig. While serving in Congress from 1843–44, Hardin was responsible for overseeing Clay’s presidential campaign in Illinois. He was present (together with G. T. M. Davis) at the Baltimore nominating convention in May and supplied the first poetic verses dedicated to the Clay-Frelinghuysen ticket. Ford’s appointment of Hardin, therefore, reflected an unmistakable erosion in the Democratic governor’s base of power. Ford himself admitted that he found it necessary to put his trust in political opponents in order to maintain military discipline in Hancock county, “that which [his] own political friends, with two or three exceptions, were slow to do.”34

Days after the election, G. T. M. Davis attended the land sales office in Quincy. While there Davis spoke with “some fifteen or twenty citizens of Hancock” who informed him that Governor Ford, just previous to his departure for Tennessee, “had prepared a list of names to be presented to the Grand Jury, with a list of witnesses to procure their indictment and conviction.” If the governor went forward with his proposed actions against the murderers of the Smith brothers, the anti-Mormons assured Davis “they would show beyond doubt, that [Ford] knew all about it.”

33. Thomas Ford to John J. Hardin, 5 August 1844, Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society.
34. Ford, History of Illinois, in Smith, History of the Church 7:46.
On August 9, Davis wrote a confidential letter to the governor. He began by referring to their unusual political arrangement, which had been forged during the fateful days of late June. “You are well aware of the relation I bear towards you in regard to the late Mormon difficulties, and the position I have occupied before the public. You cannot be otherwise than satisfied that from the previous relations existing between us, my motives could not have been otherwise than pure in sustaining you in the course you had taken.” Davis reminded Ford that he had been “assailed privately as well as publicly” by many of his “political friends, and the enmity of some of them has not been appeased to this day.”

Even with those difficulties, Davis was still in a position to support him, he said, but only “if proof is not adduced to show that you have been influenced by political motives.” Davis made reference to Ford’s recent letter to the people of Warsaw, which was at least partially responsible for the Mormon’s Democratic vote on August 5.

More critical to their common cause was the simple fact that damning intelligence about the governor’s involvement in the affair was continuing to surface. Colonel Buckmaster had reported to Colonel March and to “one or two other” citizens of Alton (which no doubt would have included G. T. M. Davis) that “on your way to Nauvoo, you and [Buckmaster] talked the matter over, and both agreed that the Smiths would be killed during your absence, and that it was his suggestion to you, to leave the wagons a few miles out of Nauvoo, so that you and your escort could get as far out of the way,” before news of the killing could reach Nauvoo. “If this statement of Buckmaster’s is correct,” Davis warned him, “your implication in the matter is fixed.”

Davis applied even more pressure. How could the governor indict Hancock County men, he asked, if evidence could be brought forward to prove his own involvement? Testimony came from Thomas Sharp, editor of the *Warsaw Signal*. Davis had spoken with the editor just the day before, who informed him “that on the morning of the day the Smiths were killed, he called upon you at your room and told you that the people intended to take the law into their own hands, and that you replied to him, they must not do it, or attempt it, while you was at Carthage, that you had come there to sustain the law, not to witness its violation.”

Further, there was additional testimony that “two different individuals, heard Col. Deming on the same morning long before breakfast, state to you that there was going to be an attempt made to rescue the Smiths out of jail and visit summary punishment upon them, but that it was the Whigs that intended to do it.” (Emphasis in the original.) Davis cautioned Ford that there was a good deal more evidence that implicated him even further.

“No my only object in writing to you, is that of a desire to see you sustained before the public in this unfortunate affair. And the best way I can serve you is to state to you facts within my knowledge, that you may act with a full view of all the circumstances before you.” The “full view” would have included the simple fact that Davis had no desire for the indictments to be put forward. No one knew what the conspirators would admit to under oath.

“What possible good can grow out of a renewal of excitement in Hancock county?” Davis queried. “If indictments are gotten up against these men, and attempts are made to arrest them, a scene of bloodshed and massacre will ensue, unequaled
during the existence of this republic.” No matter that Davis’s claims were greatly ex-
aggerated; he knew that Ford would not want to add such an episode to his already
dismal record as governor.\textsuperscript{35}

Following his return to Springfield from Nashville in late August, Ford wrote a
detailed response to Davis’s charges. Upon the recommendation of his Democratic
political advisors, however, Ford’s reply was never sent. The secret correspondence
would not be leaked to the Illinois press until after the November presidential elec-
tion.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} G. T. M. Davis to Thomas Ford, 9 August 1844, in \textit{Illinois State Register}, 8 November 1844.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. Thomas Ford to G. T. M. Davis, 26 August 1844, in \textit{Illinois State Register}, 8 November 1844.