



PROLOGUE

JOSEPH SMITH RAN FOR PRESIDENT?

As the Lord God lives Joseph shall be President next term.

—Sidney Rigdon

More than six hundred strong and scattered from Maine to Louisiana and from Nauvoo to New York City, they were the largest missionary force Joseph Smith ever dispatched. It would be sixty years before Latter-day Saint missionaries served again in such numbers. These men and one woman were storming the nation as political missionaries advocating the restored gospel and the presidential campaign of the prophet. Facing stiff resistance but also finding surprising success, these electioneers offered their fellow Americans religious and political salvation. But when enemies assassinated Joseph, their campaign collapsed.

Most Americans do not know that Joseph Smith ran for president of the United States. Almost none appreciate that he was the first presidential candidate to be assassinated. Even among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, only a small percentage realize that Joseph campaigned for the White House. Fewer still know that hundreds of electioneer missionaries canvassed the nation for him or make the connection between his campaign and assassination. Only very few of the

hundreds of thousands of these electioneers' living descendants know their ancestors were political missionaries.

Many would agree that 27 June 1844 was *the* pivotal day for nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint history. On that day assassins murdered Joseph Smith, president and prophet of the church, and his older brother Hyrum, patriarch of the church. Their deaths at Carthage Jail in western Illinois shocked and splintered the Latter-day Saint community. A plurality would eventually follow Brigham Young, but his ascendancy to the highest rung of church leadership was not the only significant consequence of that fateful day. Equally important in steadying and strengthening the struggling church would be the more than six hundred electioneer missionaries who, at the time of the assassination, had been campaigning for Joseph Smith's presidential run. Their difficult missions at tremendous personal sacrifice had strengthened their commitment to Joseph¹ and his restoration of the "Zion" ideal of a righteous theocratic society—an ideal at odds with pluralistic, individualistic, and democratic nineteenth-century America. This cadre of devoted electioneers would later help Brigham relocate the Saints and create that Zion community in the Great Basin. In this way the ramifications of Joseph's political campaign, together with his assassination, are more telling in shaping the destiny of the church than has been appreciated. Too few know that Joseph's robust campaign, and the doughty missionaries assigned to it, stamped their identity on the church in the West. Ironically, the sizable influence of the campaign, assassination, and cadre of electioneers on the progress of the church was commonplace knowledge from 1844 through the early twentieth century.

However, memory changed. While the last of the electioneers were passing away, Latter-day Saint leaders began making accommodations so the church could become acceptable to the rest of the nation. The original meaning of the campaign, the electioneers, the assassination, and theodemocratic Zion surrendered to a church eager to move past scornful public perceptions of plural marriage and theocratic governance. In 1902 church leaders authorized B. H. Roberts to revise, edit, and add commentary to the previously serialized "History of Joseph Smith." Roberts wrote within the context of the Senate hearings to seat apostle and Senator-elect Reed Smoot, and a mere decade removed from his own disputed congress-

sional election. Those skeptical that the Saints had truly changed scoured every word from Latter-day Saint leaders and publications. When Roberts's work—which became the standard treatment of the church's history for a century—rolled off the presses, Joseph's campaign was no longer remembered as a serious attempt or even a meaningful event. In the toxic national anti-Mormon atmosphere of Roberts's and Smoot's political scandals, Joseph's pursuit of the presidency was forgotten or overlooked, relegated to a historical footnote in the church's official history.²

Historians of the 1844 election are utterly silent on Joseph's presidential aspirations, probably because his assassination ended the campaign prematurely. Traditional Latter-day Saint historians, following Roberts's lead, have not considered Joseph's candidacy to have been sincere, but rather have seen it as a symbolic gesture with pragmatic undertones. In their view Joseph sought only to bring national attention to the plight of the Saints, lessen local political tensions, offer a candidate Latter-day Saints could support in good conscience, and create opportunities to spread the gospel. However, "New Mormon" historians in the last third of the twentieth century began to change the narrative. They contended in varying degrees that Joseph's nomination was serious but fatally flawed. Recent scholarship is finally giving Joseph's candidacy the thoughtful treatment it deserves.³

The most common question I hear from modern Latter-day Saints on this topic is, "Why did he run?" This is an understandable inquiry in an era when the church has strongly emphasized political neutrality for more than a century. It seems unimaginable that a prophet would seek the presidency *and* request the faithful to politick for him. However, the prophet Joseph's campaign occurred in a different time and setting, both of which must be understood to better comprehend his decisions. Joseph's conclusion to seek the presidency grew from the fusing of unredeemed persecutions, fear of future oppression, and the inspired desire to establish the political kingdom of God as part of Zion.⁴ From its founding in upstate New York in 1830, the church and its members endured oppression for their religious, social, economic, and political principles that clashed with pluralistic American social norms. Intolerant fellow citizens drove their Latter-day Saint neighbors from New York, Ohio, and Missouri. The

Missouri expulsion, sanctioned and enforced by the state government, increased Joseph's urgency and determination to protect the church and himself from future abuse.

The situation in Illinois followed the same pattern. The economic success of the Saints, disagreement over doctrine, accusations of polygamy, and expedient bloc-voting for the Saints' allies and against their enemies fostered tension between the church and its new neighbors. In the fall of 1843, finding himself and the church in an increasingly untenable position, Joseph wrote to the likely presidential candidates in the upcoming 1844 election. He asked each what his policy would be toward the Saints if elected. Unsatisfied with the responses, on 29 January 1844 church leaders determined to "have an independent electoral ticket . . . [with] Joseph Smith . . . [as] candidate for the next Presidency; and . . . [to] use all honorable means in our power to secure his election."⁵

The presidential election of 1844 had a significant impact on the church. Its prophet-leader Joseph Smith ran a third-party candidacy emphasizing national unity during a time of intense and often violent sectional and political partisanship. On 11 March 1844 Joseph created the Council of Fifty—an organization formed to establish the political kingdom of God on earth—in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ. This council coordinated Joseph's presidential campaign and the search for a western sanctuary. Its members operated under Joseph's vision of "theodemocracy," a system of governance in which "God and the people hold the power to conduct the affairs of men in righteousness . . . for the benefit of ALL."⁶ In short, Joseph saw theodemocracy as a government of people who willingly support leaders they believe are divinely called and inspired. Distinct from the church, the political kingdom would protect the rights of all citizens regardless of religious denomination or political affiliation and seek the establishment of virtuous government.

Such a theodemocracy required a faithful aristarchy to govern it. Aristarchy, a political philosophy that Joseph strongly championed, differed from aristocracy. It was governance by upright and inspired men without regard to social rank or wealth. As the prophet declared, "Certainly if any person ought to interfere in political matters, it should be those whose minds and judgments are influenced by correct principles—religious as

well as political.”⁷ The Council of Fifty viewed itself as the aristarchy of the nascent kingdom of God on earth. By late spring, they determined that Joseph’s campaign was the best option to protect the church and adjourned to join a cadre of more than six hundred electioneers, mobilizing the electorate. Within the church there was a convinced confidence about the campaign. If victory was not certain, the bargaining power of a strong national showing was. Protection for the Saints seemed within grasp.⁸

Meanwhile, apostates joined with Joseph’s political enemies in Illinois and Missouri to publish the *Nauvoo Expositor*, a newspaper hostile to the church. As mayor of Nauvoo, Joseph ordered the press destroyed. This put in motion events that led to his incarceration and subsequent murder. Joseph’s campaign died with him, yet his death triggered important changes within the church concerning leadership succession, the western exodus, and future settlement of the Saints.

The campaign missionaries directly experienced these momentous events. Having begun their service in mid-April, they campaigned and preached through mid-July 1844. Their tireless efforts strengthened their loyalty to Joseph, the Quorum of the Twelve (with whom they labored), and one another. The shared trauma provoked by the assassination of their beloved prophet-candidate further molded them into a dedicated cadre committed to Joseph’s ideals.⁹

Working alongside the Twelve throughout the campaign, the electioneers began orbits around the men who would be the church’s future centers of gravity. Franklin D. Richards best captured the connection between this particular political-missionary service and increased trust and responsibility in the church. During his campaign mission, he privately penned, “I cannot do justice to the feelings of my heart, but acknowledge the tender mercies increasing my lot in company with these brethren of the twelve on my way to perform this important mission, the faithful and acceptable performance of which involves my future prosperity in church life.”¹⁰

I have labeled these men and one woman a “cadre,” a French word meaning literally “a frame of a picture.” It originates from the Italian *quadro* (Latin *quadrum*), “a square.” As used by both cultures, a cadre was “the permanently organized framework of a military unit,” that is, the officers. The word was co-opted by Communists in the 1930s to describe

a “group or cell of workers trained to promote the interests of the Party.” Presently the word describes “a group of trained or otherwise qualified personnel capable of forming, training, or leading an expanded organization, as a religious or political faction.”¹¹ This term is ideal for the electioneer missionaries for two reasons. First, they were the ones chosen and trained to promote Joseph’s candidacy and to marshal the Latter-day Saint and wider electorate to vote for him. Church leaders carefully instructed these men regarding the urgency, importance, and divine purpose of their assignments. Second, and most important, their sacrificial service bonded them to church leaders, to one another, to Zion, and to the ideals of theodemocracy. Forged and qualified by dedicated service, they capably helped lead the theodemocratic kingdom of God after Joseph’s death. They became the officers of Zion’s theodemocratic government. A cadre indeed.

Yet my characterization of these men as a cadre of Latter-day Saint political activists is more an analytical tool to recover their important history than it is an indicator of the way they thought about themselves. By retrospectively organizing them as a distinct group, we can reconstruct their history before, during, and after the 1844 election in order to illuminate their immense contributions. To be sure, they and their church leaders *did not* view themselves as the “election cadre.” By contrast, the men of Zion’s Camp and the Mormon Battalion did perpetuate an enduring collective identity, even holding regular reunions until the end of their lives. The men in each of these groups (some would become cadre members) toiled together as a unit, inspired by a common cause and forging the natural human bonds and identity so common to proximate, shared struggle. The electioneers also did so, but in atomized units spread out across the nation. Their identity and bond were strongly tied to the cause of theodemocratic Zion, the apostles, and to their immediate cadre colleagues. The premise of this study is that despite not having a large-group identity or noted historical presence like that of an army or movement, the electioneers had a surprisingly strong influence on the history of the church. Their signal contributions have remained hidden in part because they have not been studied as a collective body through time.¹²

Because a large majority of the electioneer missionaries helped establish the Saints in the West, their understudied (and, sadly, undervalued)

story is a crucial subset of Latter-day Saint and American western history. This book sets forth the multifaceted story of these six hundred-plus political missionaries—who they were before the campaign, their activities and experiences as electioneers, and who they became following the campaign's untimely collapse. It narrates the vital contributions they made in the succession crisis, the exodus from the United States, and the building of Zion in the Great Basin. Importantly, it describes how their campaigning with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles using theodemocratic themes, coupled with the shock of Joseph's assassination, spurred their development into effective religious, political, social, and economic leaders—leaders who left an indelible imprint on Latter-day Saint history.¹³

NOTES

1. While it is customary in historical writing to refer to persons by their last names, the electioneers did not use distant surnames but rather knew their leaders as “Brother Joseph” and “Brother Brigham.” The strong, loyal friendship between these men and Joseph and Brigham is central to this story. The electioneers acted in their assigned labors in large part because of how they felt toward these two leaders. While other historical persons herein are referenced by their last names, for these two prophets I often use their first names only. Furthermore, although Joseph's claims of revelation from God cannot be proved or disproved by historical methodology, I will not hedge by writing about Joseph's revelations in terms of “he claimed” to receive them. As Richard Bushman put it, “The signal feature of [Joseph's] life was his sense of being guided by revelation. . . . To blur the distinction—to insist that [Joseph] Smith devised every revelation himself—obscures the very quality that made the Prophet powerful. To get inside the movement, we have to think of Smith as the early Mormons thought of him—as a revelator.” Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, xxi.
2. Forgetting of history was particularly common around the turn of the twentieth century. Southerners' belief in the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy and the forgetting of early black Latter-day Saints are two examples. See W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.
3. To my knowledge, only one secular historian of the 1844 election mentions Joseph Smith. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics of Antebellum America*, argues that evangelical Whigs fought against the Saints in western Illinois because of their alleged allegiance to the Democratic Party.

For examples of Joseph's absence from histories treating the 1844 election, see Saffell and Remy, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Presidential Elections*; Byrne and Marx, *Political History of Presidential Elections*; Cornog and Whelan, *Illustrated History of American Presidential Campaigns*; Schlesinger and Israel, *History of Presidential Elections, 1789–1968*; Brock, *Parties and Political Conscience*; Southwick, *Presidential Also-Rans and Running Mates, 1788–1996*; Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*; “Presidential Elections since 1789”; Scott, *Pursuit of the White House*; Havel, *U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Elections*; Shade, Campbell, and Coenen, *American Presidential Campaigns and Elections*; and Watson, *Politics of Jacksonian America*.

Examples of traditional Latter-day Saint interpretations are Durham, *Joseph Smith, Prophet–Statesman*, 145–46; Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 576–77; Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 11:208–9; Roberts, *Rise and Fall of Nauvoo*, 254; Grant, *Kingdom of God Restored*, 300; and Berrett, *Restored Church*, 178–79.

“New Mormon” interpretations began with Andrus, *Joseph Smith and World Government*. Flanders, *Kingdom on the Mississippi*, emphasizes Joseph's campaign as rooted in the political alienation of the Saints and a novel effort to defend the kingdom; Hansen, *Quest for Empire*, saw Joseph's candidacy as a desperate attempt to establish the political kingdom; Hill, *Quest for Refuge*, believes the candidacy was politically unrealistic yet a sincere means of rejecting American pluralism; Remini, *Joseph Smith*, considers Joseph's political actions as pragmatic and designed to defend the Saints, not win an election; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, interprets the extensive missionary effort as a sign of Joseph's clear goal to restore the ideal of a “patriot king” within a religious context, as the true inheritance of the American Revolution.

Two forthcoming books—Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, and McBride, *When Joseph Smith Ran for President*—will deepen our understanding of the campaign.

4. For a full discussion of the concept of Zion, see chap. 1.
5. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 568–69, 571. See also JSJ, 29 January 1844; and JSH, E-1:1869.
6. *Times and Seasons*, 15 April 1844. For instructive discussions of theodemocracy, see Andrus, *Joseph Smith and World Government*, 5–15; and Mason, “Theodemocracy in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism,” 349–75.
7. *Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1844.
8. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 270. For contemporary definitions of *aristarchy* and *aristocracy*, see *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*. For Joseph's endorsement of *aristarchy*, see Durham, *Joseph Smith, Prophet–Statesman*, 51–52. On the political kingdom of God, see Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-*

- day Saints*, 186–87; Hill, *Quest for Refuge*, 125; Hansen, *Quest for Empire*, chaps. 3–4; and Flanders, *Kingdom on the Mississippi*, 240, 279–81, 292, 302.
9. I exclude the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from my definition of the cadre of electioneers. In the spring of 1844, members of the Twelve were already elite members in the religious and political arms of Zion. My primary focus is those who volunteered and accepted the Twelve’s call to preach and electioneer for Joseph. This is not to imply that the apostles were not part of the electioneering effort. Far from it—they orchestrated and led the campaign. Their efforts and voices are included in this study.
 10. Richards, *Journal*, 24 May 1844.
 11. Definitions are from etymonline.com and wordreference.com.
 12. In the historiography on Joseph Smith, Margaret Robertson’s honors thesis is the only attempt to study the activities of the electioneers. See Robertson, “Campaign and the Kingdom,” also published under the same title in *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 147–80. Robertson analyzed the then-known number of missionaries and came to the traditional interpretations. She found no serious intent to elect Joseph or to establish the political kingdom of God. To her mind these missionaries were in no substantial way different from the legions of missionaries who served the church before and after the 1844 election. Robertson’s brief work captured only about half of the electioneers this book does. Furthermore, her interpretation mistakes the campaign’s consequences as its motivating purposes.
 13. The publication of the Council of Fifty minutes by the Joseph Smith Papers Project has only confirmed and deepened my earlier impressions of how seriously Joseph and those around him took the campaign.