

A painting of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, speaking to a crowd. He is shown in profile, wearing a blue coat and a white cravat, with his hands raised in a gesture of address. The background is a dense crowd of people, and an American flag is visible in the upper left corner. The overall style is that of a historical painting.

*On January 29, 1844,
the Prophet Joseph Smith
formally decided to run
for the office of president
of the United States.
What did he hope
to accomplish?*

Joseph Smith

Campaign for President of the United States

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It began in 1839. The Prophet Joseph Smith, finally free after more than four months of imprisonment in Liberty, Missouri, had settled in Illinois, and the Saints had begun building what would become the city of Nauvoo. With the Missouri persecutions fresh in their minds, the Saints sought redress for the grievances they had suffered, but they were not successful.¹

Frustrated, Joseph determined to seek help from the federal government. After all, weren't all Americans guaranteed the protections found in the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the United States Constitution? The very first of these is generally taken as a guarantee of the right to practice religion freely.

The Prophet Visits the President

Joseph Smith left Nauvoo for Washington, D.C., with Sidney Rigdon, Elias Higbee, and Orrin Porter Rockwell in a two-horse carriage “to lay before the Congress of the United States, the grievances of the Saints while in Missouri.”² Joseph and Judge Higbee met with President Martin Van Buren on November 29, 1839. At first Van Buren was inconsiderate of the Prophet's plea. However, as the discussion progressed, the president promised to reconsider his position and “felt to sympathize with [the Mormons], on account of [their] sufferings.”³

After their visit with President Van Buren, the Prophet and Elias Higbee stayed two months in the East, trying to gain support from senators and representatives who might be willing to espouse their cause.⁴ They met with President Van Buren again in February 1840.⁵ By this time, Van Buren had lost any sympathetic feelings he might have had for the Church. According to the Prophet, the president treated them rudely and declared: “Gentlemen, your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you. . . . If I take up for you I shall lose the vote of Missouri.”⁶

Joseph Smith's disappointing visit to Washington, D.C., became a turning point for him. His people had been abused and unjustly treated in Missouri, and the president



After failing to acquire reassurances from leading candidates, Joseph Smith decided to run for president.



of the United States had refused to help. The Church leaders would remember this neglect when the time came for another presidential election.

The 1844 Election Cycle Begins

In Nauvoo the *Times and Seasons* published an editorial on October 1, 1843, titled “Who Shall Be Our Next President?” It did not suggest any specific names but concluded that the candidate must be “the man who will be the most likely to render us assistance in obtaining redress for our grievances.”⁷ On November 4, 1843, Joseph Smith wrote letters to John C. Calhoun, Lewis Cass, Richard M. Johnson, Henry Clay, and Martin Van Buren, the five leading candidates for the presidency of the United States. Each letter described the persecutions the Mormons had suffered at the hands of the state of Missouri and then asked the pointed question, “‘*What will be your rule of action relative to us as a people,*’ should fortune favor your ascension to the chief magistracy?”⁸ Only Calhoun, Cass, and Clay responded to Joseph Smith's letters, and they expressed little sympathy for the cause of the Saints.

When the Prophet realized that none of the leading candidates for the presidency would pledge to support redress for the Saints, he held a historic meeting in the mayor's office at Nauvoo on January 29, 1844, with the

The political campaign organized electioneers to preach the gospel and spread Joseph's political position. Electioneering officials, assigned to all 26 states in the Union, included members of the Quorum of the Twelve.



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The platform also proposed changes to Congress. Joseph wanted to reduce congressional pay from eight dollars to two dollars per day. He wanted to have only two members of the House of Representatives for every one million people.¹⁴

In addition, Joseph favored extensive prison reform, forming a national bank, and annexing Oregon and Texas.¹⁵ He favored extending the United States “from the east to the west sea,” but only if Native Americans gave their consent.¹⁶

On February 24, the Prophet had 1,500 copies of the pamphlet printed. Copies were mailed to the president of the United States and his cabinet, the justices of the Supreme Court, senators, representatives, editors of principal newspapers, postmasters, and other prominent citizens.¹⁷

General Smith's Views is an intriguing document. Many of Joseph Smith's proposals came to pass, although not necessarily in the way he had envisioned: the power of the presidency was increased by Abraham Lincoln during the U.S. Civil War; the Civil War led to emancipation of the slaves; the penal system improved, although not to the extent that Joseph prescribed; and Oregon and Texas did become part of the United States. The Union's borders soon stretched from sea to sea, but without the consent of Native Americans. Elder John A. Widtsoe evaluated *General Smith's Views* as “an intelligent, comprehensive, forward-looking statement of policies, worthy of a trained statesman.”¹⁸

The Campaign

On April 9, 1844, during general conference, the campaign began to take on a unique nature. Brigham Young announced that elders would be called to both “preach the Gospel and electioneer.”¹⁹ During the latter part of the meeting, when President Young called for volunteers to serve these missions, 244 men stepped forward.²⁰

Additional electioneer missionaries were called,

bringing the total to at least 337. On April 15 they were assigned to all 26 states in the Union and to the Wisconsin Territory.²¹ Not only the number but also the quality of missionaries called was striking. Ten members of the Quorum of the Twelve—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, William Smith, Orson Pratt, John E. Page, Wilford Woodruff, George A. Smith, and Lyman Wight—served as electioneer missionaries.²²

The Quorum of the Twelve scheduled a series of conferences to be held all over the United States. The Illinois state convention, held at Nauvoo on May 17, 1844, formally nominated Joseph Smith for president of the United States and Sidney Rigdon for vice president. The delegates organized a national convention to be held in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 13.²³

The journal of Wilford Woodruff describes the activities of an electioneer missionary. Elder Woodruff left Nauvoo on May 9 in company with George A. Smith, Jedediah M. Grant, and Ezra Thayer for an electioneer mission that would last just nine weeks. During that time he recorded that he spoke in at least six “political meetings.” He spoke at many more religious meetings than political gatherings, and he always kept his religious sermons and political speeches separate. The political gatherings were usually held the night before or very soon after the traditional Church conferences.²⁴

Elder Woodruff and at least four other members of the Quorum of the Twelve attended the Massachusetts state convention in Boston on July 1, 1844.²⁵ Elder Woodruff recorded in his journal: “The Melodeon was crowded in the evening, and it was soon evident that a large number of rowdies were in the galleries and felt disposed to make [a] disturbance.” One young man rose and made a series of disruptive remarks, and fighting broke out. The police were called in to restore order. Elder Woodruff recorded,



WHY JOSEPH SMITH RAN FOR PRESIDENT

“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, 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. 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. And 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.”

Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 6:210–11.

“One person got badly cut in the face but not dangerous. The meeting was soon broken up.”²⁶ Despite the disturbance, Brigham Young wrote in a letter to Willard Richards, “All this did us good in Boston.”²⁷

Assassination Ends the Campaign

In the meantime, William Law and others in Illinois were plotting to take the life of Joseph Smith. Dr. Wall Southwick recounted a meeting he had attended in Carthage, Illinois, wherein the enemies of the Prophet had gathered together from every state in the Union but three. They were concerned that Joseph’s “views on government were widely circulated and took like wildfire.” According to Southwick, they believed that if the Prophet “did not get into the Presidential chair this election, he would be sure to the next time; and if Illinois and Missouri would join together and kill him, they would not be brought to justice for it.”²⁸ Dr. Southwick’s statement suggests that the Prophet’s presidential campaign was at least a contributing cause for his assassination.

Joseph Smith was martyred on June 27, 1844, at the Carthage Jail, ending his brief presidential campaign. Although he did not gain redress for the wrongs suffered by the Saints in Missouri, his campaign had brought much favorable public attention to the Church. Many years later, President Ezra Taft Benson said, “We should be ‘anxiously engaged’ in good causes and leave the world a better place for having lived in it (D&C 58:27).”²⁹ Joseph Smith’s presidential campaign had sought to make the United States a better place, not only for the Latter-day Saints, but for all Americans. ■

NOTES

1. For a history of the afflictions suffered by the Latter-day Saints in Missouri, see *Church History in the Fulness of Times: Student Manual*, 2nd ed. (Church Educational System manual, 2003), 193–210. It is available online at www.ldsces.org.
2. *History of the Church*, 4:19.
3. *History of the Church*, 4:40.
4. See *History of the Church*, 4:40, 43–44.
5. Some histories maintain that Joseph Smith met with Martin Van Buren only once, on November 29, 1839. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 221 and B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:30. However, the *History of the Church* also has an entry on February 6, 1840, that describes the Prophet visiting Van Buren. Historians disagree over whether this entry is simply a retelling of the visit on November 29, 1839, or the recording of a second, distinct visit on February 6, 1840.
6. *History of the Church*, 4:80.
7. *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 1, 1843, 344.
8. *History of the Church*, 6:65; emphasis in original.
9. See *History of the Church*, 6:188.
10. See *History of the Church*, 6:189, 197. *History of the Church* refers to the pamphlet as *Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States*. However, when it was published, it was titled *General Smith’s Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States*.
11. *History of the Church*, 6:206.
12. *History of the Church*, 6:197.
13. *History of the Church*, 6:205.
14. See *History of the Church*, 6:205.
15. See *History of the Church*, 6:205, 208.
16. *History of the Church*, 6:206.
17. See *History of the Church*, 6:224–26.
18. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (1991), 219.
19. *History of the Church*, 6:322.
20. See *History of the Church*, 6:325.
21. See *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1844, 504–6.
22. See Arnold K. Garr, *Joseph Smith: Presidential Candidate* (2008), 55–62.
23. See *History of the Church*, 6: 386, 390–91.
24. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, ed. Scott G. Kenny, typescript, 9 vols. (1983–84), 2:394–419; spelling and punctuation modernized.
25. The Apostles electioneering in the East did not hear of the death of Joseph Smith until July 9, 1844.
26. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:415; spelling modernized.
27. *History of the Church*, 7:210.
28. *History of the Church*, 6: 605–6.
29. *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (1988), 676–77.

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