

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 38 · 2020 · Pages 35 - 38

Offering Americans Religious and Political Salvation

Craig L. Foster

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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OFFERING AMERICANS RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL SALVATION

Craig L. Foster

Review of Derek R. Sainsbury, *Storming the Nation: The Unknown Contributions of Joseph Smith's Political Missionaries* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020). 400 pages. \$27.99 (hardback).

Abstract: *Derek Sainsbury's book discusses Joseph Smith's quest for the presidency of the United States of America and how more than six hundred missionaries were sent out across the United States not only to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ but also to electioneer for Joseph Smith and his political platform. The book offers a concise history of and fascinating information about the 1844 electioneering mission and the men and woman who offered fellow Americans both religious and political salvation.*

The 1844 presidential election was fraught with controversy over slavery and the proposed annexation of the Republic of Texas as well as a handful of flawed candidates trying to gain political leverage. Ultimately, political dark horse James K. Polk, running on a strong Manifest Destiny stand, had a close win over Whig candidate Henry Clay.

Often overlooked by people studying the 1844 presidential election and its aftermath is the short-lived campaign of Joseph Smith, which ended with his assassination in Carthage, Illinois, on 27 June 1844. Smith thus became the first United States presidential candidate to be assassinated.

Previous to his tragic end as a martyr for his cause, Joseph Smith and other Church leaders sent out what was, to that point, the largest missionary force of the Church of Jesus Christ. These men and one woman — a little more than six hundred missionaries and electioneers — spread out across the United States from Maine to Louisiana and numerous places in-between.

Author Derek Sainsbury explains that “these electioneers offered their fellow Americans religious and political salvation.” As would be expected, many missionaries experienced not only disinterest and skepticism but also persecution. What is surprising is the number of American citizens interested in Smith’s views of government and society who favorably received his electioneers.

Smith’s campaign platform, published in a pamphlet titled “General Smith’s Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States,” was actually quite foresighted and progressive for his day. He encouraged the abolition of slavery gradually and with compensation through the sale of public lands. He suggested decreasing the size and pay of Congress; pushed for a stronger federal government; supported closing penitentiaries and having the prisoners perform public works while learning the word of God; pushed free trade and securing international rights on the high seas; and, reflecting the spirit of Manifest Destiny so strong in the nation at that time, espoused the annexation not only of Texas and Oregon but also other parts of Canada. Furthermore, he pushed for a uniting of both Canada and Mexico to the United States, creating a large Pan-American country.¹

For most of these electioneers, their mission campaigning for Joseph Smith’s presidential candidacy strengthened their commitment to him as a prophet of God and to his Zionistic ideals of a righteous theocratic society, or theodemocracy governed by an aristarchy — governance by upright, inspired men without regard to social rank or wealth. Joseph Smith’s view of theodemocracy as a governmental form involved people willingly supporting leaders they believed to be divinely called and inspired.

Those who served electioneering missions believed Joseph Smith to be divinely called and inspired and sincerely believed he would, with God’s help, win the presidency of the United States. These men and the woman were a cadre of dedicated members, chosen and trained to promote Smith’s presidential ambitions and political beliefs.

Joseph Smith and his electioneers openly pushed a theodemocracy “where God and the people hold the power to conduct the affairs of men in righteousness” (97). Sainsbury writes, “The hope of Zion and theodemocracy burned in the hearts of the electioneer cadre” (145).

1. Joseph Smith, Jr., “General Smith’s Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States,” *Times and Seasons*, 1844, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/2595>. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency: From Joseph Smith to Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2011), 30.

Smith's death was met with shock, anger, and sadness by his electioneers, who felt Joseph's assassination was nothing less than religious rejection of the restored gospel and a political refutation of the prophet. Most of this cadre of electioneers later traveled west with Brigham Young and the Twelve and helped establish and lead the theodemocratic kingdom of the State of Deseret in the west. Their great desire was to fulfill Joseph Smith's Zionistic vision by establishing a theodemocracy in the Great Basin. Brigham Young put it succinctly when he stated, "To carry out Joseph's measures is sweeter to me than ... honey" (187).

In *Storming the Nation*, Sainsbury does a beautiful job of placing Joseph Smith's presidential campaign and the electioneering mission in the greater historical context. He does the same when moving the emphasis west with the Mormon migration and settlement of the Great Basin. He also does an excellent job describing the electioneering campaign of these dedicated missionaries, their journeys, successes, failures, and trials. But the book has gone a step beyond, one of the many things I love about it. Sainsbury spends about twenty pages introducing and detailing the background of these men and woman. He includes, when available, ages, marital information, how long they had been members of the Church, priesthood information, Church experience, where they were from, occupations, and a host of other information. But Sainsbury doesn't stop there. He follows these men and woman as much as possible, showing what happened to them, particularly those who made it to Utah. He gives information about how many practiced plural marriage, held Church, community, and other leadership positions, their wealth over the years, and much more.

As a professional genealogist and lover of such background information, I was a family history nerd in heaven as I read about this electioneering cadre and what became of them. Topping it off, the appendix has nine pages listing all known electioneers (311–19). The list of electioneers reads like a veritable who's who of early Mormon and Utah history. How many thousands of living members of the Church are there who have no idea that one or more of their ancestors were electioneers campaigning for the prophet Joseph Smith's quest for the presidency of the United States? The author himself found out while researching this fascinating topic that one of his own ancestors was an electioneer.

It's obvious Derek Sainsbury put a lot of time and effort into researching and writing this book, and he did an excellent job. One of the few flaws I found with the book is really nothing more than a minor quibble. While Sainsbury has an extensive bibliography, he doesn't cite

Arnold K. Garr's small but interesting book, *Joseph Smith: Presidential Candidate* (2007), a part of the Setting the Record Straight series. Even more disappointing to me personally, he appears to be completely unaware of Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency* (2008) or its enlarged and updated second edition, *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency: From Joseph Smith to Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman* (2011).

Sainsbury suggests Mormon theodemocracy's twilight took place between 1869 and 1896. By 1896 and statehood, the Americanization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members was well underway. Nancy Naomi Tracy, the only female to officially number among Joseph Smith's cadre of electioneers, sadly wrote, "Now where is Zion?" (281). By that time, the theodemocracy was only a memory. During the twentieth century, the Church made efforts to downplay its theocratic past and forget about Joseph Smith's campaign for president (xii).

Important and informative works like Derek R. Sainsbury's *Storming the Nation: The Unknown Contributions of Joseph Smith's Political Missionaries* are resurrecting this once forgotten past and helping a new generation remember Joseph Smith's campaign for the presidency of the United States and early Latter-day Saints' vision of Zion and theodemocracy. I strongly and most heartily recommend this important history.

Craig L. Foster earned an MA and an MLIS at Brigham Young University. He is also an accredited genealogist and works as a research specialist at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. He has published articles about different aspects of Latter-day Saint history. He is the author of two books, co-author of another, and co-editor of a three-volume series discussing the history and theology of plural marriage. Foster is also on the editorial board of the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal.