

## Book Reviews and Notices

*Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*, by Spencer W. McBride. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xi, 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

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Joseph Smith's campaign for the presidency lasted six months. He began the campaign in January of 1844 and was assassinated in June. Though Smith was the mayor of a city in Illinois, the prophet of a church whose membership numbered in the tens of thousands, and, by all accounts, a highly charismatic man, his odds at the presidency were—to put it plainly—zilch. This short campaign may seem to offer scant material for research, yet Spencer McBride's *Joseph Smith for President* finds a deep historical well in this brief, last-gasp effort on the part of Smith and his followers, the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), to find security and religious tolerance for themselves in Jacksonian America.

Histories of long-shot presidential campaigns, McBride reminds us, are less about the stories of elections than they are about “stories of American discontent” (208). In 1844 Smith had plenty of reasons for discontent. At the time Smith announced his campaign, the Mormons were living a perilous life in Nauvoo, Illinois, right at the edge of the Iowa Territory and therefore near the edge of the United States itself. They had been driven out of Missouri in 1838 by a violent mob under explicit encouragement by the state's governor. Thousands of Mormons were murdered and some were raped; their homes and land abandoned. As the Mormons tried to rebuild in Illinois, the ashes of this conflict continued to smolder. The state of Missouri tried repeatedly to capture Smith for extradition and more violence always felt a hairsbreadth away. Smith was willing to throw any political strategy against the wall to bring peace. Completely disenchanted with state-level governance (Missouri had not only encouraged the Mormon's forcible removal but had also failed to offer them any redress), Smith went to the federal level. He traveled to Washington, D.C., and lobbied Congress for justice after the Missouri massacre. He wrote letters to each of the candidates in the 1844 presidential race to see whether

the Mormons had their sympathy. And finally, he decided to run for the presidency himself.

In Mormon history, Smith's campaign for the presidency has often been seen as a desperate moment in Smith's leadership—at best, grandiose, at worst, despotic. In McBride's hands, however, the campaign reveals itself as a show about religious liberty, state politics in the early Midwest, and national politics in the early republic. Smith's campaign, McBride contends, was motivated by his devotion to the idea of religious freedom in the new nation. The campaign stands as a tribute to the failure of the early republic to extend the idea of religious liberty to anyone but Protestants.

There is great entertainment for political historians of all sorts here, not only scholars of Mormonism. Smith's campaign was distinctive. He was the first presidential candidate to be assassinated, and also the first to have a missionary force electioneer for him. (McBride wonderfully gives voice to these "electioneering missionaries" (122–28)). Smith's campaign also sheds light on the development of nominating conventions and early campaign strategy. The state politics of Illinois that surrounded Smith, along with the local politics of Nauvoo, are adeptly rendered by McBride, and sit at the heart of this story.

Historians of Iowa will note that the Iowa Territory haunts this book. Smith was forced to flee into the Territory multiple times towards the end of his life, usually by dramatically crossing the Mississippi River under cover of night—a crossing his followers would replicate after his assassination. The constant presence, just across the river from Nauvoo, of land in which neither Illinois nor Missouri had jurisdiction was essential to Nauvoo and Smith's resilience. But Iowans also likely played a role in Smith's death, as some members of the lethal mob were rumored to have arrived from over the river (188).

Once again, early Mormonism proves itself to be an incredible window into Jacksonian politics. In the Latter-day Saints, you have a religion that insisted, repeatedly, on living together *en masse*, on a great degree of self-governance and city building, on bloc voting, and on a variety of unusual religious tenets. They did not make for easy neighbors. But they may have been the most fascinating neighbors the early Midwest ever had.