

Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom

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Recommended Citation

McBride, Spencer Welles (2022) "Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.1.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss1/4>

Interview

Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom

(SM), Spencer W.

Winter 2022

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Hello fellow Civil War era enthusiasts! The Civil War book review is pleased to be joined by Dr. Spencer W. McBride, associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Dr. McBride's research focuses on the intersection of religion and politics in the United States. His first book, *Pulpit and Nation: Clergyman and the Politics of Revolutionary America*, published by UVA press in 2016, examined the ways in which clergymen and Revolutionaries employed religion and Christian rhetoric in the politics of the Founding era. In this interview Dr. McBride and I will discuss his most recent book, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*, published by Oxford University press in 2021. Dr. McBride, thank you for joining us today.

Spencer McBride (SM): It's a pleasure to be here with you.

(CWBR): I'd like to start off by asking you how you came to this topic of your most recent book, and if you could also talk about how it fits within your broader concern with the relationship between religion and politics in America during the long nineteenth century.

(SM): I came to the topic of Joseph Smith presidential campaign, first, out of fascination. I've always been fascinated by third party or independent campaigns, those that really had no chance of winning. But what do these campaigns tell us about the dissatisfaction of a certain segment of the American population? You know I think of the twentieth-century Eugene Debs campaign for the Presidency. James G. Bernie and Joseph Smith are both running at the same time, neither one is really going to win, and I think they kind of know that. Yet their campaigns still matter, not because they had a chance to succeed, but because they become a window to the dissatisfaction

with the *status quo* among a certain segment of Americans. But also, because I think there's a significance to Joseph Smith's campaign where larger questions of federalism and constitutional history are concerned. This campaign that's so little known, the response we get from most people is, 'Wait, Joseph Smith ran for President?' Yet it sheds light on frustrating components of the Constitution, at least, how it was interpreted in antebellum America that prevented the realization of universal religious freedom. And, so, I saw writing this book as a way of telling a fascinating story—a little known story—but one that illuminates an aspect of American political and constitutional history that in many ways is overlooked and, in some cases forgotten. And for me as a scholar of religion and politics, I saw it as kind of a natural next step from my book on religion and the American Revolution to another component of religion and the politics of antebellum America.

(CWBR): Very good, and I agree, I think it was a fascinating story, I really enjoyed reading your book. To me it felt kind of like a tragic, nonfiction *bildungsroman* of Joseph Smith's political growth and change over the course of his life in relation to, like you said, the Constitution and American politics. How does his attitude toward the United States, its politics, and its governance change over the course of his years as prophet and presidential candidates?

(SM): I think, Joseph Smith's experience is something that many Americans, even today, experience. You know, you're raised, often, with kind of an idealistic view of how American politics work. This idea that it's based on merit, it's based on principles, it's based on what's right and what's wrong. And then, once we begin to view it more closely . . . in the case of Joseph Smith, his idealism was shattered the closer he got to the seats of power. He goes to Washington D.C. in 1839 to meet with Martin Van Buren and Congress, because the Mormons had been expelled from the state of Missouri under threat of state-sanctioned extermination. And he has this idea that, 'If I go to Washington D.C. and meet with the President and tell Congress what happened, they will have no choice but to take our side and to help us.' And Joseph Smith gets a really tough lesson in the American political system—that it's not just about right and wrong it's, not about merit, in many cases it's hardball politics, and it's not as easy as making your case of saying, 'Hey, we were wrong, please help us.' There were other, other, components of the political system going on. And so, you see Joseph Smith, as you know, he would describe

himself as a patriot, he described himself as someone who loves his country, but he's saying, 'There's something wrong with even the Constitution if a people can be expelled from a state by order of the governor under threat of extermination, and the federal Government says we can do nothing to help you.' And as I've talked with different groups about *Joseph Smith for President*, I think one of the things that's kind of been lost in our collective civic memory is that the Bill of Rights did not apply to the individual states prior to the American Civil War, and the adoption of the 14th Amendment. And, so, Joseph Smith, is essentially saying, 'Hey, the Constitution is great, I like it, we need it, but there's something wrong when the federal government cannot ensure that religious minority groups and other minority groups are protected from persecution, when states fail to do so, or in this case when the state is the persecutor.'

(CWBR): Right much of your book is about this tension between individual liberties and the doctrine of states' rights, that's kind of elemental to the struggle that Smith goes through, first, you know, as prophet and then eventually as presidential candidate. So, if you would just kind of expand on that a little bit, specifically you mentioned the violence, the state-sanctioned violence, that he and other members of the Church of Latter Day Saints endured in Missouri and then later on in Illinois. Could you explain how that sparked kind of his, his political awakening. Um, you know, I think that he's an example of people that might not otherwise be politically inclined or active, and then, once they've been oppressed, or repressed, or experienced some kind of wrong, you know, they become a political actor themselves, so if you could explain that how, you know, the kind of process of how that happened.

(SM): Yeah, and it's kind of ironic, because I think throughout the throughout American history there's never been a politician who has proudly declared themselves a politician, right. Everyone says, 'I don't aspire to political power, it's this issue that drives me, you know into the spheres,' when in reality there's many people who are actually after the power. I think, Joseph Smith is one who genuinely has no desire to be a politician, has no desire to enter into the political fray of antebellum America, but through circumstances, is desperate. He needs to protect his own rights, the rights and property of his people, the Mormons are a persecuted religious minority at this time. And it's those circumstances that forced him into a position he's not comfortable with, that he doesn't desire, and here he is running for President in 1844. And, and it has everything to do

with how the Constitution is understood and interpreted. Again, the Bill of Rights doesn't apply to the individual states. Congress fields for him, but says, 'We have no jurisdiction.' The Bill of Rights was designed and interpreted at that time as protecting people, the rights of the people, from infringement by the federal government, but the federal government couldn't enforce it wins when States failed to do so. And he's saying, 'There's something wrong here.' And what's fascinating, though, is that—and when people read the book they'll see—even as Joseph Smith is trying to reform the federal government, even as he's trying to run for President to do so, he's looking at other options. 'What if we leave the United States altogether?' There's negotiations with Sam Houston and the Republic of Texas. Sam Houston needs a group of people to live on the Nueces Strip, and it's better if they come with their own militia as the Mormons do. And the Mormons need a place of relative isolation. And so there is this talk at one point that the Mormons would relocate to Texas. And so, Joseph Smith is kind of exploring all of his options. And I think we see that common trend today that when people are in kind of a minority position, they throw whatever legal or political challenge against the metaphorical wall that they can and see what sticks and that's certainly the case for Joseph Smith.

His platform is fascinating. His campaign platform is innovative, sometimes naïve, always relevant. But it's very much this kind of populist message of an outsider who, who hasn't played this game for a long time and is coming in, as a novice.

(CWBR): Well, that actually takes me to my next question—perfect segue. So in many ways Smith is just emblematic of mid-nineteenth-century America. You know, especially the kind of reform *zeitgeist* that's, that's you know, taking over the country. And at the same time, while he fits within that mold, he steps beyond it, not just, you know as a religious leader, but also as a political thinker. I mean his ticket is more progressive than, I would imagine, pretty much anyone else at the time. So could you give us an idea of some of the, the elements of his platform that he ran on that were, you know, emblematic of nineteenth-century politics and reform, but also he took it a step further.

(SM): Yeah, so as I mentioned, at the heart of his campaign platform was empowering the federal government to protect minority groups when states failed to do so. But he wasn't a one issue candidate. He put together a platform that was robust and innovative and controversial.

He called for the abolition of slavery, by the year 1850, and his plan to do so was quite unique for its time. He called for the Federal Government to purchase the freedom of every enslaved man, and woman, and child, and to use the proceeds of the sale of federal lands in the West to purchase everyone's freedom. This is an idea that would come up again in the 1850s, and Josiah Quincy, who met Joseph Smith during his campaign, writes decades later after the Civil War's happened saying, 'Maybe we should have given more, more consideration to Joseph Smith's idea back in the 1840s.' Now, there was no way that southern enslavers were going to go for this, but, but we see Joseph Smith as the pragmatist saying, 'We need to end slavery, that's the ultimate good; what's a way that we can do it that southern enslavers won't feel like, quote-unquote property is being taken from them?'

He's calling for the end of the prison system, and this is a time when penitentiaries were first starting to sprout up in in different states. And Joseph Smith saw the criminal justice system as broken, that it was meant only to be punitive and not to reform men. That it was creating a permanent criminal class and that people of a lower class were treated differently than people have an upper class for the same crimes. And so, he saw the criminal justice system as, as needed to be overhauled.

He talks about establishing a national bank, which had always been a hot-button issue; as long as the United States had existed under the Constitution, they argued about banking. But he argued that a third bank of the United States would be different than the first two, because no one would get rich from it. Those that ran it would it be given a stipend of two dollars a day and that it would, it would be designed to stabilize the economy of the United States, not to enrich investors and speculators.

And then of course, he weighs in on territorial expansion, which was the hot-button issue in 1844. And he said he's okay he's okay with the United States and next thing Texas. And I think what makes that less controversial is that he's calling for the end of slavery, and slavery is what made the annexation of Texas so controversial. So he makes that claim knowing that in one breath he's called for the end of slavery, so it's easier to say, 'Yeah, we should annex Texas.' He also calls for the United States to take all of the Oregon country. That you know, rather than dividing it and compromise with Great Britain, the United States should take it should take the Oregon country in its entirety and, eventually, he says, with Native Americans' permission, United States should fill all of Canada, and Mexico, and North America.

He calls for a decrease in the, the pay of Congress and the size of Congress. He's hitting all these hot-button issues. So, so yeah one issue drove Joseph Smith into the campaign, into the election, but he wasn't a one issue candidate. And he very much has a progressive, reform-minded platform of vision.

(CWBR): I do want to keep talking about his campaign, and beyond the, the platform itself, and touch on the, the mechanics of it—his political apparatus. So one of the things that ,you know, not only was his, his platform kind of in line with the kind of norms of the time—that he did exceed those—he also was his, his campaign's mechanics and apparatus was just like you know the Whigs or the Democrats, but in in a way, he also went a step beyond what they were doing. So, what was his campaign apparatus like and how did his leadership of the Church, and the infrastructure that he, they had already created with the Church of Latter Day Saints help him in his endeavor to become president?

(SM): Joseph Smith had an advantage that most independent candidates for President running outside the two-party system did not have. He had a group of experienced missionaries; men who were used to leaving home for a period of time, traveling with, you know as the Bible says, without purse or script, and you know preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Well, Joseph Smith decides to kind of employ these same men to use that same skillset for preaching politics to electioneer for him. And so, this is a time of great change and presidential political campaigning as the readers of the *Civil War Book Review* will know. Candidates aren't quite making stump speeches for themselves, yet, but they're getting very close to that point. But it's much more common, for you know open campaigning by your surrogates to the general public. And that's exactly what Smith does. And he, he deploys over 400 electioneering missionaries to canvas the entire country, and to carry with them on what I call a political tract, essentially his political pamphlet called *General Smith's Views on the Powers and Policy of the United States Government*. And to go and to try to get enough popular support for his candidacy so that he could win.

But it wasn't just publicity, you know, and I think this is one of the places where we can see that this wasn't simply a p.r. stunt, as we might call it today. They start building the electoral infrastructure. They have nominating conventions in every single state, they select electors, so

that in the event that Joseph Smith gets enough popular votes in any given state, which was very unlikely, but in the event that it happened, there would be the electoral system, the electoral infrastructure put in place to make the election possible. This is fascinating for a third-party candidate to be doing in 1844.

In many ways, Joseph Smith is part of the evolution of presidential campaigning in American history, and in some ways he's ahead of the curve. They also found a newspaper in New York City called *The Prophet*, where they publish a newspaper that, that reprints articles about Joseph Smith, about his policies. Knowing that they may not have a large subscriber base for the newspaper itself, but, in an age where newspapers are hungry for content, and they reprint things printed in other papers all the time, this is a way of getting Joseph Smith's campaign ideas in national newspapers by printing their own. And it's perhaps my favorite fun fact, is Sam Brannan was the editor of Joseph Smith's campaign newspaper. Now most Americans who know who Sam Brannan is know that he's the one who played a leading role in the California Gold Rush. His newspaper in San Francisco publishes the first news of gold being discovered in California. Well, that printing press that he used in California to print news of the California Gold Rush is the same one he used to print Joseph Smith's newspaper. I know that's a tangent, but I think it's a fascinating one. And I think perhaps my favorite story from all the work that these electioneering missionaries do, and then they go everywhere, you know. One is Brigham Young and, and other Mormon leaders, you know, deal with hecklers in Boston. A riot breaks out at one of their conventions, with the hecklers fighting the police that come to keep the peace. But, but I think my favorite my favorite story then would be in Tennessee, Mormon electioneering missionaries are surrounded by a mob, not because of their religious beliefs, but because Joseph Smith's political pamphlet calls for the end of slavery, and is us deemed abolitionist material. And, and they are shut down by a mob again, I think Mormons are used to being attacked by mobs for their religious beliefs, but in this case it's their antislavery position that brings more violence upon them.

(CWBR): You mentioned the press and the newspapers, which were a central part of American politics, as much then as they are now. And indeed most presses were affiliated or entirely mouthpieces for the major parties at the time. And so, in this instance, you have this outsider, this third-party candidate who's trying to get his platform to the masses and he creates his own

newspaper. And then, some of what they print is picked up, you know, along the wire that we see, you know, when you look at nineteenth-century newspapers there's always a segment that says, you know, 'From the wire,' or something along those lines. But then also those newspapers start reporting, you know their own independent stories on Smith and his candidacy. What were those stories like, and what do you think their reaction to Smith and his candidacy represents about their beliefs of nineteenth-century American politics?

(SM): I think in general newspapers throughout the United States, that reported on Joseph Smith's candidacy, I'd say the majority found it amusing, and there was a level of mockery. Some took his campaign *issues* seriously without taking Smith *candidacy* seriously. For instance, there were some abolitionists newspapers that thought, 'Hey, this is actually a great idea for ending slavery, we should talk about this more,' or, 'Let's talk about criminal justice reform.' So they're not taking Joseph Smith seriously as a candidate, but they're taking some of his issues seriously. But even in the mockery, I think there's something to be gleaned from that. People don't usually mock something that doesn't matter. Like there, there's a worry throughout American history of what happens when you combine the position of religious leadership and political leadership. That's not new; it existed before Joseph Smith it existed after Joseph Smith. And so, in mocking Joseph Smith's ideas—you know what made them worth mocking in the first place? What made them, what made it worth the column space in your newspaper to give this attention to, to making fun of this, you know kind of independent candidate for President? And I think we see underlying—and sometimes explicitly stating, stated in the articles—but underlying this mockery is a fear of what does it mean when religious leadership and political leadership are combined, but, more specifically, when it's a leader of a minority religious group that lives communally, that, that follows their religious leader in a similar way that Catholics follow the Pope. What does that mean for the American state, for the American electorate? And so even in kind of making fun of Joseph Smith's presidential ambitions, they reveal, they illuminate this underlying uncertainty in in the United States.

(CWBR): So, in a sense, they're, they're masking an anxiety that they have about the maybe even the fragility of American governance and politics at a specific moment in time?

(SM): Yeah absolutely. And I think that we see that trend even in mockery today. And social media, maybe amplifies it but, but you know, often in mocking something, yeah there's some, some things are amusing, they're good for some laughs, but often, if we look closely, why even pay attention to it in the first place. And, and, and often it's because there's, yeah, as you say there's an underlying apprehension about the fragility of the American state or of American society.

(CWBR): So you bring up part of the anxiety non-Mormons express about Joseph Smith's candidacy is the fact that he is a religious leader and wants to become a political leader, and you call that a “theodemocracy.” And how he and his, the, the leaders of the church create what they call the Kingdom of God and His Laws. So could you talk a little bit about how Smith and his supporters saw the intersection of their faith and politics?

(SM): Yeah, so in Nauvoo, Illinois where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was headquartered, Joseph Smith forms a council that he calls the “Council of Fifty,” also known as the Kingdom of God and Its Laws, to consider a number of different issues. One, it helps support Joseph Smith’s presidential campaign. But this Council was also tasked with looking at other options to secure the rights and safety of Latter Day Saints throughout the United States, including, as I mentioned earlier, moving to Texas or moving West into unsettled territory where they could live in isolation.

But this Council also takes up kind of philosophical discussions of government. What they believe, as many Christians of that time believed, that the Second Coming of Jesus would usher in a millennial era where earthly governments would kind of be done away with, and, and Jesus would reign personally upon the earth. And so, Joseph Smith and others are considering, ‘Well what type of government, what principles of government, get us closer to that millennial standard? And how can we kind of begin to prepare for this prophesied time of Christ ruling on the earth in person with our manmade governments today?’ And Joseph Smith and others talk about what some would label theocracy, what they would kind of, you . . . They didn't want it to come across as being undemocratic, so they call it a “theodemocracy,” this idea where they're still voting, people still have a say, but you also have leadership from God by revelation and through a prophet. And so, this committee talks through all sorts of ideas, and some of them are

kind of extreme, and some of them are pretty mundane. Joseph Smith is actually one of the more moderate voices in this council. You have some people like Brigham Young that really don't see a need for constitutions in the first place. And so, there's rarely a room where Joseph Smith is the moderate voice, but in this room, he was the moderate voice where he's saying, 'Hey, we don't have to undo the entire American system; we can actually find a way to bring the voice of God, e.g., revelation, divine revelation into the work of government.' And, and that's what they're doing. Now it's fascinating because it remains theoretical. This group, at least during Joseph Smith's lifetime, never seeks to actually implement its ideas. But they are serious in talking about them. Even as they're talking about breaking away from the United States and establishing this "theodemocracy," they're finding ways to stay in the United States. The Council Fifty is helping run Joseph Smith's campaign, they're petitioning Congress to make Nauvoo, Illinois a federal city, like, like Washington D.C. so that the federal government could then protect the Saints, they could get around the states' rights philosophy. On their petitioning to be given a liberal tract of land in the western United States in federal territory, so again, they can get around states rights. The Council of Fifty is also petitioning to make Joseph Smith a general in the United States Army, again a way of getting around states' rights. And so it's fascinating because it's easy to look at the Council Fifty, and some of these rather radical ideas of theocracy or "theodemocracy," and say, you know, 'Whoa, this is pretty extreme.' Yet I think it's important that, even as, to know that even as they're having these extreme conversations, they're looking for very pragmatic ways of remaining in the United States under the prevailing system of government that then existed.

(CWBR): One of the things that you point out is how Smith, like other politicians of his time, draw on the American revolutionary heritage or even going as far back as the early colonial period; this idea that, that they're are a beacon to reform the United States from without it, but at the same time trying to, to reform it from the inside, so that hopefully they don't have to leave. So, in what other ways was he trying to draw on the heritage of American dissent and American patriotism in his campaigns, or even just in his leadership is as, you know the, the leader of the Mormon population in Nauvoo?

(SM): So, Joseph Smith's recitation of American history and his political pamphlets is pretty germane, it's pretty typical of, of how Americans talked about themselves at that time, right. This overly simplified story or narrative of the founding—it's all about rights and freedoms. And, you know, the way the Mormons were being treated was a betrayal of the very ideals upon which the United States was founded. And I think you know there's some very obvious and clear truth to what Joseph Smith is saying. But there's also kind of the legendary status the mythical status of this American Founding of that, that equality was present from the beginning, and then departed from. When the reality as historians know is equality was set up as an ideal and debated over who should receive it, right. So, Joseph Smith very much falls into the celebratory recounting of American history. But he also uses that to kind of highlight what a departure the treatment of Latter Day Saints should be seen as. Even though religious minorities have been persecuted, from time to time throughout American history, he says, 'The way the Latter Day Saints are being treated flies in the face of our founding ideals, it's un-American to treat us this way.' Whereas a historian, knowing what's actually happened in the past, might say, 'Actually, that's pretty par for the course in the United States at this time'—not to condone the persecution, but, but just to see that, yeah, this is what happens in the United States. And perhaps the most fascinating example of this, it predates the presidential campaign by just a couple months when it looks like what it happened in Missouri with mob violence was going to happen again in Illinois, Joseph Smith writes a letter to the people of Vermont. Now Joseph Smith himself was born in Vermont, so he sees himself as one of Vermont's native sons. And the people of Vermont then and now are very proud of their revolutionary legacy specifically, that of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys. And so, here we are in 1843 Joseph Smith writes an open letter that's published as a pamphlet called "To the Green Mountain Boys," where he specifically calls upon the citizens of his native state of Vermont to . . . to rise up in defense the Latter Day Saints, in the name of liberty, the same liberty that their forefathers fought for under Ethan Allen. And so, here's a very explicit invocation of Vermonters' revolutionary heritage being applied to the protection of a minority group in in 1844.

(CWBR): Now, one of the things we've already talked about is how his campaign was modern, it was you know, on par with the others and, and part of the modern campaigning system of this time was a convention. And so, the Mormons plan to hold a convention in Baltimore where they

anticipated, you know, nominating Smith for candidate for presidency. Unfortunately, Smith never made it there, he was assassinated while in custody of the state of Illinois before he could make it to the nominating convention. Could you talk a little bit about the precipitating events before the assassination, and what inspired those people to take Smith life.

(SM): Joseph Smith has the unwanted distinction of being the first assassinated presidential candidate in American history. But there's an asterisk next that, there's a caveat: Joseph Smith was not assassinated because he was running for President. He, he has that distinction because he was assassinated *while* running for President. But the, the circumstances that led to his murder were local in nature. So, in 1844 there had been some dissension in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; once-prominent members of the church stepping aside and trying to start their own church. In many cases, but not all, it had to do with economic rivalry, or theological disagreements—some of Joseph Smith's teachings late in his life about the nature of God caused some to step away, the private practice, practice of plural marriage, or polygamy, which wasn't widely known, but known within some circles in the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois lead others to step away.

However, there had long been animosity outside the church. Citizens of Western Illinois that saw the concentration of Mormons in one city in one county has given them too much power in elections and in the economy of the area. And they had been looking for a way to get rid of the Mormons, to drive them out of the state for some time. Governor Ford of Illinois had said, that from, you know, the summer of 1843 there was a group of committed anti-Mormons that were just waiting for their chance to expel Joseph Smith and his followers. And so, this dissension from within the church combines with the antipathy from without the Church in 1844. When some of these Mormon dissenters publish a newspaper in Nauvoo, called the *Nauvoo Expositor*, and it prints critical articles of Joseph Smith, including claims about polygamy, Joseph Smith as mayor of Nauvoo goes to the city council, and they have just hours-long debates about what should be done. Does what this newspaper published constitute libel? And if so, does that justify the city council taking action to close down the press? This was a very debatable topic then and historians still debate, to this day, the legality of what they decided. But Joseph Smith and the City Council believe that they were in the right in ordering the destruction of the printing press that, that this these Mormon dissenters were using.

This leads to a series of legal kerfuffles, and charges being, coming against Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. And Joseph Smith declares martial law. And so, eventually Joseph Smith and others are imprisoned on charges of inciting a riot for the destruction of this press. But the declaration of martial law as a mayor leads to charges of treason against Joseph Smith and, and his brother Hyrum. And so, while others are able to get out of jail on bail, Joseph and his brother are constrained in this jail cell. Again, this is all ambiguous legally, it can be debated from either side, but many see this as this is a chance to hold Joseph Smith captive so that a mob can do what a mob wants to do, and that's exactly what happens. On June 27, 1844, a mob storms the jail in Carthage Illinois, and assassinate Joseph and Hyrum Smith. And, and it's, it's a tragic day in the memory of Latter Day Saints, in the present and it's a significant day in American history for a number of reasons., including the, the first assassination of an American presidential candidate.

(CWBR): So after Smith was murdered, the Church, you know kind of expectedly experienced some splintering and fracturing. There were some division in, over what the church should do next: Should stay in Nauvoo? Of course, the state had you know their own things to say about that. So, if you would kind of finish by talking about what happened within the Church and the leadership after Smith assassination, and how that led to the, the Mormons' movement of out of Illinois.

(SM): As I mentioned, even as Joseph Smith's looking for solutions to the problems that are plaguing the Latter Day Saints, there's options to leave the United States there's options to stay in it. It becomes very apparent after his assassination that the Latter Day Saints need to plan to leave the U.S. altogether. But there's debates on how they should do it, where they should go, and there's debates about who should be leading the Church in the first place. Brigham Young, who is the resident of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a high-ranking organization within Mormon leadership, claims that he, as president of that quorum, is the successor to Joseph Smith. Others claim that same privilege. And ultimately there's a schism, but the vast majority of Latter Day Saints follow Brigham Young's leadership. And so you get these other splinter groups, but, but Brigham Young and, and those that follow him are by far the largest of those groups. Ultimately Brigham then determines, 'we need to leave. We're going to go West. We're going to go to (what was then) Mexico, and the great Salt Lake Valley.' By the time they get there,

ironically, the Mexican American War is happening. But Brigham Young and the Latter Day Saints really believe that they are leaving the United States when they begin their you know historic westward trek.

There's other groups that stay in the United States. One guy was still so set on Texas as being the future home in the United States that he leads a splinter group to Texas. There's a man who produced a what turns out to be forged blessing from Joseph Smith, where he claims Joseph Smith named him his successor. He leads a group up to Beaver Island, Michigan I believe. And so, so you see kind of the splintering but, but the vast majority go with Brigham Young. And so the story of Brigham Young's westward kind of migration is one of giving up on the United States. They believe that the country had failed them, they had tried, and tried, and tried to work through the established system to have their civil rights guaranteed, and had failed time and time again to realize that. And so it's, it's a story of a persecuted minority fleeing the country, only to find that through wars and geopolitics, by the time they get to the Salt Lake Valley. it's once again part of the United States. And the ongoing disputes with the United States Government continue on for decades to come.

(CWBR): All right now I enjoy a good counterfactual as much as any historian, so I'd like to ask you, lastly: If Smith were not assassinated, if, if he did actually not only get the chance to run for President, but get the chance to be elected president, what kind of President, do you think he would make?

(SM): I think, Joseph Smith would have had as a steep learning curve. I mean if we think back to his visit in 1839 to the White House, and his kind of idealism of American government, you know that shattered pretty quickly. He was much, he was much more schooled on how the American political system worked by the time he runs in 1844, but I think being, coming from outside the two major parties, and, and having never really functioned as a member of Congress, or as a governor—yes, he had been a mayor but that's a lot different than the role of President—I think it would have been a steep learning curve. I think it would have led to some fascinating policy discussions in Congress. And yeah, but it's hard to say how effective any president could be in the 1840s, 1850s because we know what happened to presidents in that time period, right? It was a very fractious time in American history, so I don't know if Joseph Smith could have.

handled the responsibilities and roles of the office any better or worse than the men that came to occupy that position. I think he would have been faced with the exact same challenges. He had this this really innovative way of ending slavery, but the two sides of the issue were so entrenched, as we know it took, it took a war to actually end that institution.

(CWBR): Before we go, I'd like to ask, are you currently working on any projects you'd like to share with us and would you like to tell us more about your work with the Joseph Smith papers collection?

(SM): Absolutely. I've been working on the Joseph Smith Papers Project since I finished my Ph.D. in 2014. It's a really fantastic project to be a part of as we seek to publish every existing document created by or for Joseph Smith, so letters he wrote, letters written to him, his legal documents, his business documents, his journals—we're publishing everything. And it's very exciting to be a part of, and we our last volumes of the print series will be out in 2023, so we're just about at the end of that portion of the project.

For my personal scholarship I am finishing up a documentary history of New York's Burned Over District. So, as many of the *Civil War Book Review*'s readers will know, New York is famous for having a high concentration of revival meetings in the Second Great Awakening. They were happening all over the country, but they are happening in high concentration Western New York. That's where Charles Finney was really doing a lot of his revivalist work. But this is also a place where there's a strong concentration of reform movements. Anti-Masonry. Temperance, antislavery, women's rights, all these movements are happening nationwide, but they're in high concentration in western New York. And there's a correlation and causation at play there. What my co-author on this project Jennifer Dorsey and I are doing is presenting this history in sixty to seventy documents. So we're presenting these primary source documents with brief introductions, so someone can essentially read these sixty to seventy documents and figure out this history, can kind of read it in the words of the men, women, who are living it themselves. And so, our working title is *New York's Burned Over District: History in Seventy Documents*, though, that number is going to vary, once we have to, we have to get under a certain word count with our press so, so it may be fewer documents.

(CWBR): Well, regardless of the number of documents you'll include we look forward to it hitting the shelves. Dr. Spencer McBride, thank you very much for joining us today it's been a great pleasure.

(SM): Oh, it's been a pleasure for me too. Thanks for the time.

(CWBR): And listeners, thank you for joining me and Dr. McBride, associate managing historian at the Joseph Smith Papers Project and author of *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*, published by Oxford University press.