

Methods and Motives: Joseph Smith III's Opposition to Polygamy, 1860–90

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WHEN JOSEPH SMITH III PREACHED HIS FIRST SERMON as leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints at Amboy, Illinois, on 6 April 1860, he expressed his unqualified aversion to the Mormon doctrine of plural marriage: "There is but one principle by the leaders of any faction of this people that I hold in utter abhorrence; that is a principle taught by Brigham Young and those believing in him." The doctrine was, of course, polygamy. But Smith also declared that his father, Joseph Smith, Jr., had never been involved in the practice. "I have been told that my father taught such doctrines. I have never believed it and never can believe it." He added, "If such things were done, then I believe they never were done by divine authority. I believe my father was a good man, and a good man never could have promulgated such doctrines" ("Mormon" 1860, 103).

No issue infuriated or drew his attention as did plural marriage — and especially charges of his father's role in its origination. Indeed, opposition to the practice became something of a *cause célèbre* for Smith and, by extension, for the Reorganized Church during the nineteenth century (Blair 1973, 215–30). Recent historical investigation has demonstrated that, by the last decade of the century, the Reorganized Church as an institution had rejected the previously well-accepted idea that Joseph Smith, Jr., had begun the practice (Blair 1985, 20–22). During the 1970s and 1980s, however, numerous historians, among them Reorganized Church historian Richard P. Howard, probed deeper into the origins of plural marriage, demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt the Mormon prophet's central role in developing the doctrine during the Nauvoo experience and offering frameworks for understanding it (Howard 1983; Blair 1985; Bitton 1977; Foster 1981; Bachman 1975; Hill 1977; Van Wagoner 1985; Newell and Avery 1984).

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These compelling historical arguments raise a central question: How could Joseph Smith III flatly deny his father's role in beginning Mormon polygamy while confronted with substantial evidence to the contrary? Additionally, what role did Smith play in the antipolygamy crusade of the latter nineteenth century? These questions inform the analysis presented in this essay.

Essentially, Joseph Smith III approached his father's involvement in plural marriage from an already fixed viewpoint. His admission that he could never believe his father might have been involved in polygamy seems to have guaranteed his perspective in spite of countervailing evidence. Smith subscribed to a postulate as immovable as a geometric theorem: (1) Joseph Smith, Jr., had been a good man. (2) Good men do not practice polygamy. (3) Therefore, Joseph Smith, Jr., could not have been involved in Mormon plural marriage. All his actions and thought processes concerning the practice rested upon this central postulate.

Throughout the remainder of Smith's career, his position on plural marriage never wavered. For instance, in 1866 Smith wrote in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, "Joseph Smith was *not* a POLYGAMIST in 1843 and 1844, as I have every reason to believe, from every proof I have been able to gather" ("Reply" 1866, 63). He also wrote to Caleb Parker in Lanark, Idaho, 14 August 1895: "Father had *no wife* but my mother, Emma Hale, to the knowledge of either my mother or myself, and I was twelve years old nearly when he was killed. *Not a child* was born to father, except by my mother, *not one*" (Letterbook 6). Finally, in more reasoned tones, Smith wrote in his memoirs: "To admit that my father was the author of such false theories as were being taught, or that he practiced them in any form, was not only repulsive in itself to my feelings and strongly condemned by my judgment, but was contrary to my knowledge of, and belief in him."¹

With a belief system that required his father's innocence, Joseph Smith III could not sit by quietly while others charged his father with responsibility for beginning the practice.² Feeling it his duty as a son, he desperately sought to clear Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, name. "Is it manly or unmanly for a son to defend

¹ J. Smith 1934-37, 82 (2 April 1935): 432. Additional examples of this viewpoint are in Joseph Smith III's (1) published articles: 1870, 1880, 1882, and 1889; and (2) letters: to Cousin John, 28 Dec. 1876, Letterbook 4; to E. C. Brand, 26 Jan. 1884, Letterbook 4; to L. O. Littlefield, 14 Aug. 1883, Letterbook 4; to John Henry Smith, 6 Jan. 1886, Letterbook 4; to Deseret News Col, 21 March 1896, Letterbook 6; to Hon. J. C. Barrows, 3 Jan. 1880, Letterbook 2; to Hon. G. F. Edmunds, 4 March 1886, Letterbook 4; and to Zenos H. Gurley, 5 March 1886, Letterbook 4. See also Samuel H. B. Smith to George A. Smith, 10 July 1860, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; "A Lusty War Cry," 1882.

² Even the prophet's brother, David H. Smith, expressed his misgivings about their father's innocence in an 1872 letter:

I know my mother believes just as we do in faith repentance, baptism, and all the saving doctrines, in the books of the church and all, but I do not wish to ask her in regard to polygamy, for dear brother God forgive me if I am wrong. . . . I believe there was something wrong. I don't know it, but I believe it, the testimony is too great for me to deny (D. Smith 1879).

See also Robinson, April, June, Sept., Oct. 1890, April 1891; McLellin 1872; Smith, 2 Apr. 1879.

his father's good name according to his convictions of honor and truth?" Smith asked only somewhat rhetorically on 6 May 1896 in a letter to the *Deseret News* (Letterbook 6). He frankly admitted to E. L. Kelley, a member of the Reorganized Church's Presiding Bishopric during much of the latter nineteenth century, "I have been ambitious of but one thing, so far as human ambition is concerned, and that was to prove by the logic of conduct that my father was not a bad man" (10 July 1883, Kelley). Maintaining family honor was a common concern of the period (Kern 1975; Greenacre 1963). Joseph Smith III believed that the Smith family legacy was most important in the overall development of the Reorganized Church ("Card" 1860, 170; J. Smith to Charles Strang, 22 July 1882, Letterbook 3A). He may also have been concerned that he would have to answer to his father at some future time. As he told E. D. Smith on 22 July 1896:

Your father is like mine, ever on the other shore; both of us are rapidly going thitherward; the work of our fathers was clear to them; both earnestly engaged in it as the way of life; we shall meet them, and I am going to try to so live that when I may meet them, it will be safe for them to say, "Joseph, you fought bravely, and though at times the battle seemed to go against you, you rallied well, and we are glad to meet you" (Letterbook 7).

Joseph Smith III was also greatly concerned about the welfare and viability of the Reorganized Church. This concern motivated his every decision. And he believed that proving his father's innocence of polygamy would enhance the church's uniqueness and reason for being. "To me the gospel plan as taught by Joseph Smith," he wrote to Zenos H. Gurley, Jr., 24 July 1879, "is not so defensible from the ground that he did preach, teach, and practice polygamy, as upon the basis that he was not its author" (Letterbook 2).

Giving all credit to Joseph Smith III's essential honesty, I believe that his concerns with proving his father's innocence and his commitment to divorcing the Reorganized Church from plural marriage rendered him unable to honestly investigate Mormon polygamy's origins. Without question, he was convinced he had three tasks: (1) To clear his father of any involvement in the practice of plural marriage, and thereby redeem the family honor; (2) To build a place for the Reorganization somewhere between the radical Mormonism of the Great Basin — where plural marriage most recognizably separated those Mormons from the rest of American religion — and the mainstream of American Protestantism (Vlahos 1980, 176–77); and (3) To end the practice of plural marriage among the Mormons, on the grounds that it was immoral and a blot upon the religion his father had instituted.

With these goals in mind, as well as his desire to maintain harmony within his own organization, Joseph Smith III was very cautious about insisting as an article of faith that his father had *not* been the author of the plural marriage doctrine, especially in his early years as president. Because many church members had weathered the movement's splintering following his father's death and had some knowledge of doctrinal practices in Nauvoo, Smith allowed for other opinions. For instance, he always explained that the Reorganization opposed

polygamy without referring to his father's involvement. He responded to an inquiry from Texan J. L. Traugher on 13 February 1877, "So far as polygamy or spiritual wifery is concerned, the Reorganization denies its correctness without reference to whether he [Joseph Smith, Jr.] did or did not practice it" (Letterbook 1A). On 5 March 1886, he wrote to Zenos H. Gurley, Jr., an apostle who was a gadfly to Smith on the question of polygamy's origins as well as other issues, "You know that while I believe father was not the author of Utah polygamy I have not and am not now making the battle against the Utah church on that ground but upon the ground that plural marriage is not of God no matter whoever the revelation, so called, came through or who taught or practiced it" (Letterbook 4). Smith also suggested that his father had not been perfect and that if it turned out he had been responsible for polygamy's establishment, he would be punished. He told a J. J. Barbour of Dart Town, Georgia, on 15 May 1878, "While I fully believe that Joseph did not receive the revelation referred to, yet, if he did, it is so directly opposed to the laws already received, that I must [admit] it to have been either of *man* or of the Devil" (Letterbook 1).

Joseph Smith III also took, at least at first, a moderate position within the official quorums of his own church. For example, a joint meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve on 2 May 1865 discussed the origins of Mormon polygamy. The minutes of that meeting noted:

The question arose as to whether Joseph the Martyr taught the doctrine of polygamy. President [William] Marks said Brother Hyrum [Smith] came to his place once and told him he did not believe in it and he was going to see Joseph about it and if he had a revelation on the subject he would believe it. And after that Hyrum read a revelation on it in the High Council and he Marks felt that it was not true but he saw the High Council received it.

Joseph Smith III did not accept this testimony, but in the interest of church unity and welfare, he did not press his position. Instead, he was satisfied that the body adjourned without issuing a binding policy to the church upon the origins of polygamy (Council, 11).

Two years later another joint meeting of the Apostles and the First Presidency reconsidered the subject. After considerable discussion, Smith supported tabling a resolution stating that Joseph Smith, Jr., had not been the originator of plural marriage "because of the almost universal opinion among the Saints that Joseph was in some way connected with it." He commented, "Passage of the resolution would do more injury than good" (Council, 9 April 1867, 34).

Even when Joseph III sought to discover the truth about his father's involvement, he was hamstrung by a certain benevolent prejudice that prompted him to buttress what he already believed rather than alter it in any substantial way. He dismissed plural marriage evidence that contradicted his preconceived notions using several sophisticated rationales.

There is no doubt that the Reorganization leader was deeply troubled by the plural marriage issue. He often said that he had no knowledge of his father's guilt in implementing the doctrine, but was that true? Whatever inci-

dents he may have witnessed in 1843 and 1844 as a young boy he may have repressed. Certainly some of his early writings suggest submerged pain (Smith, Jan., Feb. 1845). His papers contain copies of correspondence defending his father and his church, but we have no way of knowing if he failed to include letters that he did not or could not refute concerning the plural marriage issue. Admittedly, much of this is supposition, but it should be raised as a possible explanation.

Smith also seemed to have employed clinical denial — refusing to believe or allow awareness of an unpleasant or threatening aspect of reality. His flat denials of his father's role in plural marriage have some substantiation, to be sure, but they were in large measure faith statements that ignore overwhelming information to the contrary. His 1860 comment, "I have never believed in and never can believe it," is an example of such an *a priori* decision to reject all but what he wished to believe.³

Without question, Smith also rationalized away evidence which incriminated his father. Although Smith responded differently to shifting situations and divergent sets of evidence, complicating an explanation of his behavior, it appears that his approach toward polygamy was to accept what supported his position and reject countervailing evidence. It is easier to substantiate how Smith's preconceptions and mental processes shaped his explanations of polygamy's origins. Smith "read law" during his pre-presidency years between 1854 and 1856 under two different western Illinois attorneys. Although he was never admitted to the bar, he learned how to ask questions that gave the answers he sought (Smith to James Whitehead, 8 Sept., 1884, Letterbook 1A; Launius 1982, 124–27). When interviewing those with firsthand knowledge of plural marriage in Nauvoo, Smith typically framed his questions to reflect his preconceived notions. "Was my father married to more than one woman and did they live together as husband and wife?" Perhaps a witness could answer yes to the first part of the question, but a truthful witness would be forced to answer no to the second part, as plural marriage practices in Nauvoo were clandestine.

Early in his career Smith rejected all but what he considered eyewitness commentary and urged his associates to do the same. He told J. F. Minton, for instance, "Don't make statements of which you have not the proof at hand, or know first what it is."⁴ Hearsay evidence is often unreliable, but a significant amount of the information Smith rejected was not, apparently, second or thirdhand but was provided by people who learned about plural marriage from some of Nauvoo's high Church officials — the Twelve, the Bishopric, and High Council — that Joseph Smith, Jr., had instituted the practice of plural mar-

³ Emma Smith apparently exhibited this denial defense mechanism concerning her memories of polygamy as well. See Newell and Avery 1984, 95–105, 297–304; Newell 1984, 12–13; Beecher, Newell, and Avery 1980, 51–62.

⁴ J. Smith to J. F. Minton, 13 March 1891, Papers; J. Smith to Zenos H. Gurley, 24 July and 20 Aug. 1879, Letterbook 1. Smith's mother had also taken this approach. Emma wrote to Thomas Gregg in 1846, "Everything that has not come within my immediate observation remains doubtful in my mind until some circumstance occurs to prove reports either true or false" (quoted in Newell and Avery 1984, 366).

riage. These people were close to the source of the teaching in both time and space. Nonetheless, Smith rejected their testimony if it was not eyewitness information.

An 1885 interview in Utah with Solon Foster makes this clear. Foster had lived in Nauvoo in 1844 and 1845, part of that time in the Nauvoo Mansion where he was the Prophet's coachman and where he and young Joseph III had become friends. He had learned of plural marriage while in Nauvoo; and if he had not been taught the practice by Joseph Smith, Jr., he was intimately acquainted with those who expanded the practice near the time of the Prophet's death. Joseph Smith interviewed Foster about his father's involvement and recorded the following exchange in his memoirs:

"Brother Solon, were you ever present at a marriage ceremony of any kind which occurred between my father and any other woman other than my mother, Emma Hale?"

"No; I was not even present at their marriage."

"When you were an inmate of my father's house at occasional stated periods, as you have said, did you ever see any woman there whom you knew to be a wife to my father, other than my mother?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever meet, in social gatherings anywhere in the city of Nauvoo at any time in company with my father, introduced by him or others as his wife, other than my mother Emma?"

"No, sir."

The interview continued for some time after this exchange, Smith pressing harder with each question, but using very specific questions rather than inviting Foster to tell him what he knew. Smith finally exploded: "I discover that, like others, you know nothing at all, personally, that would convict and condemn him, for you say he never taught you the doctrine; you say you never saw him married to any woman other than my mother" (Memoirs 83 [24 March 1936]: 369). Foster's recollection of this conversation is much different. As related by John R. Young in 1931, Foster told Joseph that his father had been intimately involved in polygamy, citing as one example the famous confrontation between Emma Smith and Eliza Snow. Foster presumably remarked, "The night your Mother turned Eliza R. Snow outdoors in her night clothes and you, and all the children stood out in the street crying, I led you back into the house and took you to bed with me, and you said 'I wish Mother wouldn't be so cruel to Aunt Eliza.'" Admittedly, this was Young's recollection of a speech by Foster given years earlier, but it points up the problems inherent in trying to pin down evidence (Young 1931).

Smith considered all of his interviews as strong evidence acquitting his father of all charges, but seemed willing to stretch or misconstrue evidence to support his position when, in fact, the evidence was not particularly impressive to those without his unique mindset. A conversation with Melissa Lott Willis, who had lived in Nauvoo during the 1840s, is a case in point. Smith visited her while on a missionary trip to Utah in 1885 and recorded this exchange in his memoirs:

"Now, Melissa, I have been told that there were women, other than my mother, who were married to my father and lived with him as his wife, and that my mother knew it. How about it?"

She answered rather tremulously, "If there was anything of that kind going on you may be sure that your mother knew about it" (83 [28 April 1936]: 530).

This could not be construed as a particularly firm denial of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, involvement in plural marriage. At best it was a "non-denial denial," to use a phrase made famous by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward during their Watergate investigations with the *Washington Post*. But Joseph Smith used this testimony and others like it to buttress his belief in his father's innocence.

There were those both within and without the Reorganized Church who regularly told Joseph Smith III that his father had taught plural marriage. George A. Smith and other Utah relatives regularly tried to explain to him Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, role in the development of plural marriage. Joseph F. Smith began to collect affidavits and other evidence in the 1870s to prove that Joseph Smith, Jr., had originated the practice. Older Reorganized Church members who had been in a position to learn about the practice in the 1840s also described for Joseph III plural marriage developments.

Smith reacted to these efforts in several different ways. Most often, as with Solon Foster, he discounted statements because they were not eyewitness accounts. At other times he would try to impeach the testimonies of his witnesses. It was virtually a foregone conclusion that Utah church leaders, whose testimonies he believed were biased by their immoral character in perpetuating polygamy, would be discredited in this way (G. A. Smith 1869; Smith 1934–37, 82 [8 Jan. 1935]: 47–49, 82 [1 Oct. 1935]: 1264–66).

A more difficult problem arose in dealing with members of the Reorganized Church. For example, prickly apostle Zenos H. Gurley, Jr., frequently told Smith that his father had been a polygamist (Vlahos 1971; Gurley 1873, 1874, 1879). At first, Smith may have claimed that Gurley had no firsthand knowledge of the situation in Nauvoo, which was true. But in 1888 when Gurley wrote an autobiography in a history of Decatur County, Iowa, he inserted an affidavit by his father-in-law, Ebenezer Robinson, who had joined the Mormon church in 1835, which said that Joseph Smith had taught him the doctrine in Nauvoo (Gurley 1887, 543–44; Turner 1985, 378–84). Attempting to throw a shadow over the affidavit, Smith wrote in his memoirs that he and a local Methodist minister were discussing the new county history not long after its publication and the question of the affidavit came up. "Yes, I have seen it, Brother Smith, that article can do you no harm," the Methodist minister said. "The writers are too well known, and the effect will be quite contrary to what they anticipate" (1934–37, 83 [11 Feb. 1936]: 176). This conclusion does not seem to be warranted, however, as Zenos Gurley was a popular politician in Decatur County throughout much of the 1890s (Blair 1970).

If one of the other approaches to discredit evidence did not seem appropriate, Smith was likely to ignore the issue entirely. He reacted this way to testimonies of some of his Utah relatives and fellow Reorganized Church members all too often. He was silent in the face of challenges from Isaac Sheen, William Marks, James Whitehead, George A. Smith, and others (Marks 1865; McLellan 1872). W. W. Blair, an apostle and later counselor in the First Presidency of the Reorganized Church, met with James Whitehead in April 1874 to

ask him about plural marriage in Nauvoo. Blair's diary is revealing: "J[oseph] did te[ach] p[olygamy] and pr[actice] too. That E[mma] knos it too that she put [the] hand — of wives [in] Jos. hand. W[hitehead] says Alex H. Smith asked him . . . if J[oseph] did P[ractice] and tea[ch] P[olygamy] and he, W[hitehead] told him he did." Blair apparently confronted both Joseph and Alexander Smith with this information, but they seem to have made no response at any time to it (W. W. Blair, 13, 17 June 1874).

Many called Smith stubborn for refusing to admit that his father had initiated plural marriage. Zenos Gurley chastised him: "You absolutely refuse to believe the evidence that would convict [your father]" (Gurley, 6 Apr. 1879). When challenged in this way he typically responded, as he did to J. J. Barbour on 15 May 1878: "I am not positive nor sure that he was innocent" (Letterbook 1). When pressed further, Smith was known to have reacted more forcefully on occasion. For instance, Gurley questioned Smith's integrity and Joseph Smith III responded, "I tell you, brother, I have been cut to the quick, when brethren have affirmed that I did know that my father was guilty of practicing polygamy; and denied it because I was obstinate, and sinned against light and knowledge in so denying" (24 July 1879, Letterbook 2). This placed Gurley on the defensive and prompted him to seek a reconciliation (Gurley 1879). Gurley's reconciliation was only temporary, however; eventually he was dropped from his position as an apostle and, in 1886, withdrew from the movement, in part over the issue of plural marriage (Vlahos 1971).

Joseph Smith III admitted insufficient information concerning the origins of polygamy both less frequently and less candidly as his years in the presidency passed. Alma R. Blair (1985) suggests that as his opponents became fewer he could afford to be more persistent. By the mid-1880s, virtually no other opinion could be expressed in the Reorganized Church. Apostles Jason Briggs and Zenos Gurley, who tried, were harshly dealt with by the church (Vlahos 1971; Blair 1980).

While Smith was generally tolerant of other positions throughout his career, on this issue he would accept no compromises. He was even willing to violate his basic integrity by sanctioning outright, fully understood untruths on at least one occasion. A letter on 11 March 1882 from Joseph Smith III to his uncle, William B. Smith, then writing a book about his career in Mormonism (1883), warns:

I have long been engaged in removing from Father's memory and from the early church, the stigma and blame thrown upon him because of Polygamy; and have at last lived to see the cloud rapidly lifting. And I would not consent to see further blame attached, by a blunder now. Therefore, Uncle, bear in mind our standing today before the world as defenders of Mormonism from Polygamy, and go ahead with your personal recollections. . . . If you are the wise man I think you to be, you will fail to remember anything [but] referring lofty standard of character at which we esteem these good men. You can do the cause great good; you can injure it by vicious sayings (Letterbook 3; See also J. Smith to William Smith, 12 July 1879, Letterbook 2).

William Smith acceded to his nephew's wishes both in his public statements and private letters, clearing his brother of any involvement with plural marriage even though William had once been involved himself (Smith, 26 Oct. 1893; Bates 1983, 16–18; Edwards 1985; Lyon 1973, 203; Hutchins 1977, 76–77).

This is an understandable though rather astonishing document. In the early years of his denials, Joseph Smith III was seeking to defend his family name and create a viable new church. By 1882 after more than twenty years of public proclamations, Smith's personal honor was at stake in proving his father's noninvolvement in plural marriage. If William Smith, a member of the ruling family in a position to know beyond all doubt what Joseph Smith, Jr., had taught in Nauvoo, had publicly countered Joseph III's position, the result could have been critical both to the Smith family and the Reorganization. At the least it would have severely damaged Joseph Smith III's credibility. Fortunately for him, William Smith was old, ill, financially dependent and therefore accepting of his nephew's direction (Howard 1978, 24–28).

Joseph Smith III's perceptions about the origins of plural marriage greatly affected the Reorganized Church's perspective in the national antipolygamy crusade of the latter nineteenth century. While Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, role in the introduction of plural marriage in Nauvoo remained officially unresolved throughout the 1860s, the issue became increasingly important after the Reorganized Church opened its mission to Utah in 1863 and became critical when the Smith sons began work there in 1866 and were exposed to first hand Mormon polygamy (Shiple 1969). Rivalry between the Reorganized Church and the Utah Mormons intensified during the 1870s.

Joseph Smith III made four missionary trips to Utah before 1890. Each time, he denounced polygamy and tried to improve his father's reputation. Defending Joseph Smith, Jr., became the style and aim of the Reorganization's antipolygamy stance. Smith won favor and support from those outside of Mormonism who opposed polygamy and the Utah Church and gained respect for the Reorganization. The fact that the Reorganized Church rejected polygamy while the Utah Latter-day Saints embraced it created an easy-to-remember dichotomy for outside observers. Joseph Smith III used this dichotomy to carry out a two-phased policy toward the Utah Saints. First, he executed a vigorous missionary program to "rescue" Latter-day Saints enmeshed in the "evil practice" of plural marriage. Smith's missionaries to Utah preached essentially a threefold message: (1) The true successor to Joseph Smith, Jr., his eldest son, had taken his rightful place in the presidency of the church; (2) Brigham Young was a usurper of authority and a dictator; (3) Plural marriage was a false doctrine whereby Young held his followers in a bondage as evil as Southern slavery (Blair 1973; Howard 1983, 17–19).

The second phase of Smith's policy involved working closely with political leaders and non-Mormon reformers to destroy the political power of the Mormon church and to end plural marriage. Smith thus involved the church with many individuals with differing goals but all intent on destroying polygamy among the Great Basin Mormons. Smith provided information on the "Mor-

mon Question" to political leaders at least as early as 1863 and as late as 1890. His circle of political contacts during this period included Congressmen William H. Ashley of Ohio and William F. Hepburn of Michigan; Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield; Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont, Governor Eli H. Murray of Utah Territory, and several politicians of lesser note. In demand as an antipolygamy speaker and writer, Smith helped mobilize popular support for eliminating plural marriage. In all instances, he argued that his father had never been involved in plural marriage (Launius 1982, 304–19).

Joseph Smith III's first real involvement in the political antipolygamy crusade came in May 1866 when, as Joseph Smith, Jr.'s son and because of his church's other activities, Congressman James M. Ashley asked him to come to the Capitol to confer about the "Utah Question" with members of the House Committee on Territories. The committee was most concerned about the Mormon Church's apparent disregard of federal authority and was framing legislation to bring the territory more in line with other western jurisdictions. Ashley hoped, in addition, to persuade Congress to pass legislation that would put teeth in the almost unenforceable Morrill Antipolygamy Act of 1862 (Ashley 1866; Poll 1958, 113). Smith had long wanted to talk about the Morrill Act. Consequently, he and Elijah Banta, a huge amiable church official, left for Washington on 30 May 1866 (J. Smith and Smith 3:349; activities reported in J. Smith 1934–37, 82 [16 July 1935]: 912–13).

On 6 June 1866 Smith met with Ashley in his boarding house to discuss plural marriage in detail before the committee's formal hearings. After discussing the issue for some time, Ashley pointedly asked the young Reorganization leader what he would recommend doing to deal with the situation in Utah. Smith offered several suggestions immediately, impressing Ashley with his grasp of the problems in the territory. Consequently, the Congressman asked Smith to write a report to aid the committee in its planning. After several informal meetings with Ashley and other members of the Committee on Territories, Smith gave Ashley his report. In it he summarized the history of the Mormon church from 1830 to 1846 and affirmed that it had obeyed the laws of the land until his father's death.

Smith also asserted that since the split in the church, the Utah-based faction had constantly sidestepped the law and had not been forced back into line, "and that such failure and neglect of duty on the part of the executive officers of the various States and the Nation have given rise to a conviction upon the part of some of the [Utah] church members that there was no disposition to so enforce the laws of the land." Smith argued that the Mormons had been allowed to rule themselves for so long that they honestly believed they should hold this power forever, even if their practices ran counter to the laws of the United States. He added that it was time for government officials to assert their legitimate authority over Utah Territory. Smith concluded though that no further laws establishing federal jurisdiction were needed: "The Constitution was very plain about where final secular power rested, and no legislation need extend their basic right."

Ashley had specifically asked Smith to comment on the polygamy issue, knowing his strong opposition to the practice. He asked if Smith thought Congress should pass further antipolygamy legislation, and if so what forms these bills should take. Ashley cautioned Smith, however, to remember that the Constitution expressly forbade the proscription of religious freedom, and wanted to determine the legality of the practice in Mormon theology and tradition. Was polygamy a religious tenet, he asked, and thereby inviolate under the law? Smith's written response was cautious and tactful. While acknowledging the right of every citizen to worship as conscience dictated, Smith asserted that plural marriage was neither substantiated in scriptures nor in Christian history and indeed contradicted everything for which Jesus Christ had stood. The original Mormon faith, Smith insisted, as a part of Christianity could never have adopted such a tenet, and he produced carefully selected evidence to suggest that it had been virtually unknown during his father's lifetime. He urged the proper enforcement of legislation designed to end the practice of plural marriage.

Smith left Washington on 11 June 1866 satisfied that he had presented his viewpoint on the polygamy issue rationally and had convinced Ashley and his committee that his approach to political control of the Mormons was the most logical and likely to succeed. He was, however, skeptical of success because of the slow and circuitous nature of government. When asked to comment on his accomplishments in Washington, Smith described the many meetings with committee members and restated his views but added that little would probably result from the episode ("Pleasant Chat," 1866, 177-78; J. Smith to Charles Derry, 29 June 1866, Papers). This appraisal proved correct. For months Congress debated the necessity of new antipolygamy legislation but passed nothing. Eventually they decided, almost by default, to enforce the laws already on the books until a sufficiently strong coalition arose to pass additional antipolygamy laws (Poll 1958, 113-18).

In part because of this stalemate in Congress, a pressing concern of governmental policymakers of the 1870s became the appointment of territorial officers to Utah who could carry out already existing laws. Utah Mormons had experienced virtually endless trouble with federal authorities since the Utah Territory was created in 1850, and at the center of the government's difficulties was invariably the territorial governor. A move arose in the 1870s to appoint Joseph Smith III to that position partly because of his reputation among non-Mormons, partly because of the Reorganization's solid support of the civil government in all matters affecting the question of church and state, and partly because of its opposition to plural marriage. When J. Wilson Shaffer died in October 1870, several of Smith's supporters petitioned President Ulysses S. Grant to appoint Smith as his successor (D. Smith 1870). An Illinois newspaper summed up the matter: "If the government would make Joseph Smith governor of that territory, it would wipe out at once polygamy and fair Utah would take her place among the states, with no blot upon her face" (*Weekly Argus*, 21 June 1879).

Although President Grant appointed a career Republican politician instead of Smith, the prophet's friends continued their efforts for the next several years.

On 19 October 1879, for instance, Edward W. Tullidge, the iconoclastic Mormon historian who had joined with the Reorganized Church a few months earlier, wrote to President Rutherford B. Hayes urging Joseph Smith's appointment to the Utah governorship. He claimed that Smith would be able to destroy the "polygamic theocracy" in the Great Basin and predicted that with Smith as governor and with some 200 projected Reorganized Church missionaries working in the territory, 20,000 to 50,000 Utah Mormons would soon join the crusade to abolish plural marriage (Tullidge 1879).

As late as 10 September 1881 the editor of the *Weekly Argus*, published in Sandwich, Illinois, not far from the church headquarters at Plano, issued a lengthy statement supporting Joseph Smith III's governorship of Utah:

The Argus had frequently pointed out a remedy [to the Mormon question], which is on the frontiersman's principle of a backfire. Opposed to these [objectionable] religious practices, while holding the general principles of the Mormon faith, is the "Reorganized Church" with Elder Joseph Smith at its head; a body of eminent, able men, already making inroads on the Brighamites, and to aid them in promulgating the new faith in Utah should be the aim of the general government.

In the end it would be wise to appoint Elder Joseph Smith — who had the character and the ability for the position — as governor of that territory, an appointment which would receive the approval of his own branch fully, and largely of the other, and would divide the power of the Brighamites as to enable this branch successfully to combat the crime at its central point. Mr. Smith is a true, loyal citizen, a practical Christian, a temperance man, an able leader, and bitterly opposed to the "peculiar institution."

There is no evidence that these proposals were seriously considered either by Washington officials or Joseph Smith III. That his name arose as a possible candidate, however, indicates his and the Reorganized Church's stature among the opponents of polygamy.

Smith did, however, maintain an active connection with various politicians interested in the antipolygamy question. In June 1880 Smith wrote to Republican presidential candidate James A. Garfield about his movement's hatred of polygamy and asked his assistance in ending the practice. In his 1881 inaugural address Garfield demanded that Congress eliminate polygamy within the United States (J. Smith to James A. Garfield, 18 June 1880, Letterbook 3). At about the same time Smith corresponded with Vermont Senator George F. Edmunds about legislation that eventually passed in 1882 as the Edmunds Act, which provided for the easier arrest and prosecution of those engaging in "unlawful cohabitation" (J. Smith to Robert Warnock, 20 March 1882, Letterbook 2). Still later Smith met and discussed the enforcement of this legislation with Governor Eli H. Murray of Utah Territory who promised a tough but fair enforcement policy which, with a few exceptions, he delivered (Smith 1934–37, 83 [3 March 1936]: 274; J. Smith to Bro. George, 20 June 1883; Miscellaneous Letters and Papers).

Smith also recognized that not all Mormons were polygamists or disloyal to the United States and should not be persecuted. When Edmunds proposed a bill in 1886 stiffening antipolygamy laws and destroying the political identity of the Mormon Church, Smith asked that Congress temper the bill so that no

person's freedom of worship was violated. "Unwise legislation in the present crisis can not fail to be productive of evil," he warned Representative William F. Hepburn of Michigan in a letter on 9 February 1886. "Solid work for the benefit of the people governed and the maintaining of the supremacy of the institutions and laws of the Country ought to [be] sought after." Smith also pointed out to Hepburn that a proposed oath which would require all Mormons to disavow any connection with their temple beliefs and forsake other religious commitments as a prerequisite for suffrage, stood very close to a violation of freedom of religion. He pleaded with Hepburn to make Congress understand that it must "be wisely discriminant between acts of disloyalty and that which is belief preparatory to the life beyond." The polygamy question aside for the moment, Smith discussed the legality of the bill forcing Mormons to denounce their religion: "I acknowledge the right of the government to define largely what the rights may be to control my civil actions [as it does regarding plural marriage]; but certainly deny the right to impose oaths upon me that ask me to renounce my allegiance to God in any sense; as this oath by Senator Edmunds may be construed to do" (Letterbook 4; see also J. Smith to William H. Kelley, 14 Jan. 1886).

On 4 March 1886 Smith wrote Edmunds that he favored moderation in dealing with non-polygamist Mormons, allowing them all the rights and privileges of full United States citizenship. He remained as steadfastly opposed to plural marriage as ever but did not want to persecute innocent people for their fellow church members' actions. Regarding polygamists, however, Smith told Edmunds, "The hand of Government has too long been clothed in silk; those who had attempted legislation have feared to hurt; this made the leaders of the polygamists bold and aggressive, and they presume upon the old time plea of 'persecution, oppression, religious intolerance, the rights of conscience,' &c." If Edmunds restricted his activity to antipolygamy legislation, Smith counseled, there would be little trouble with non-polygamist opposition to the bill. If he persisted in attacking the Mormon Church as a whole, however, Congress could find itself with a Mormon war on its hands that would be expensive, certainly, in property, dollars, and, quite probably, human life. Ill feelings would persist for generations (Letterbook 4).

Joseph Smith III looked upon the passage of the Edmunds-Tucker Act in February 1887 with mixed emotions. The law, as Smith had hoped, was directed at polygamists. It provided for stricter enforcement and stiffer prison sentences, loosened the confines of legality under which Federal marshals worked, and permitted certain types of circumstantial evidence to be admitted in court cases dealing with plural marriage. These results pleased Smith. But he seriously questioned some of its other sections. The act disincorporated the Mormon church and provided for the seizure of all Church property in excess of \$25,000. It called for a test oath of allegiance to the United States government before any Utahn could serve in public office or vote. Smith had already protested the oath's inclusion to Senator Edmunds, and he accepted some of the remaining provisions of the act only with reservation. Once it was enacted, however, Smith supported its enforcement, concluding that while it was not

the best tool to resolve the Mormon issue, it was the only one available and therefore had the potential of ending the half-century long practice of polygamy.

From this perspective, then, it should not be surprising that Joseph Smith III was overjoyed when Wilford Woodruff announced, in 1890 after a complex set of compromises, that he was advising Latter-day Saints to contract no marriages forbidden by law. For Smith, plural marriage's elimination vindicated his position that his father had not been its author. It signified, furthermore, that his efforts were indeed reforming the Mormon Church; and although the Reorganization actually had little to do with the Utah Mormon decision to end plural marriage, Smith believed that he could take a fair measure of credit for the action. He summarized this belief in a letter to Utah Congressman Moses Thatcher on 18 December 1896 when the state entered the Union. "I have watched the course of the events as it has appeared to the public," he wrote, "and have been anxious to see the right vindicated" (Letter-book 7; Newell and Avery 1984, 302-9).

With the passing of plural marriage, Smith was convinced justice had triumphed, truth had prevailed, and one branch of his father's church had been cleansed of its most prevalent blemish.

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