

THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF JOSEPH SMITH

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There is a game popular among Mormons which any number can play; it is easy to learn and it requires very little equipment: it is called, "Quoting the Prophet." To play the game all one needs is at least one contemporary issue and the writings of Joseph Smith, preferably the seven volumes of the *History of the Church*, or, if one has no taste for research, any of the short collections of the Prophet's teachings will do nicely. The point of the game is to force the other players to accept your views on the issue in question by proving with a series of quotations — relevant if possible, irrelevant if necessary — that the Prophet agrees with you rather than with your opponents. The best part of the game is that everyone wins because the players are simultaneously the judges, for the Prophet cannot be questioned as to which side he really prefers.

It is not my intention to play that game. What follow are some comments on the contemporary relevance of Joseph Smith's political views as expressed in his presidential platform of 1844. I readily admit that these are the comments of only one Mormon and that others who see politics differently may find my comments irrelevant or simply wrong. But my first concern is to deal fairly with the Prophet and not to use him to grind my own axes. My second concern is to give full recognition to the fact that Joseph Smith was addressing himself to specific problems as he experienced them, and that attempts to deduce solutions for our own problems from the solutions he suggested for the problems of his day is a risky business indeed. But it seems to me that the specific solutions he proposed flow from some fundamental propositions about politics which remain as valid today as they were in 1844. I shall try to suggest what those propositions are and leave it to the reader to perform the task of deriving solutions from them.

The specific proposals in Joseph Smith's presidential platform are relatively few in number. He proposed the abolition of slavery, the establishment of a national bank, the adoption of a "judicious tariff," a reduction in the size of the House of Representatives, economy in government, annexation of Texas and Oregon, reform of the penal system, elimination of courts martial, and granting of power to the President to suppress mobs without waiting for a request from state governors. Let us look at these in some detail.

candidates in 1844 reveals the extent to which eclecticism and originality are mingled. The Democratic Party (James K. Polk), responding to the growing Southern influence in its leadership, affirmed that the federal government is one of limited powers and that those powers did not include a protective tariff, a national bank or the distribution of public land proceeds; yet its expansionism on Texas and Oregon was unrestrained. The Whig Party (Henry Clay) concentrated on the virtues of the candidate without itemizing the elements of his "American System" or mentioning Texas and Oregon. The Liberty Party (James Birney) called for the abolition of slavery by state and ultimately federal action, but without compensation to the owners. Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, eds., *National Party Platforms, 1840-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1966), pp. 3-9.

The major plank of the Prophet's platform was the elimination of slavery by compensating slave owners for the loss of their slaves. Joseph Smith thought slavery violated the basic truth enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" The corollary of this truth is that the Constitution was adopted to protect all men in their equal rights, and that the desire of government leaders ought to be "to ameliorate the condition of all, black or white" The platform is particularly scornful of those in the Prophet's day who were willing to interpret the Constitution in such a way as to make some favorite legislation constitutional but who insisted that the Constitution prohibited interference with slavery. The immediate goal Joseph Smith sought, the elimination of slavery, has been won, but a belief in the political theory of the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution as the principal protector of equal rights is the heart of his political legacy to us. We ignore at our peril the importance the Prophet placed on all Americans sharing equally in the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

The Prophet's concern for equal rights for all Americans brought him into direct conflict with the doctrine of "states' rights." That conflict is reflected in his proposal to give the President the power to use armed forces to suppress mobs without waiting for an invitation from a governor for assistance. While this proposal appears reasonable and unobjectionable on its face, it has profound implications, for it assumes the existence of individual rights of American citizens to which all "states' rights" must be subordinated. Joseph Smith reserved his deepest scorn for those who asserted that federalism prohibited the federal government from intervening on behalf of citizens who were denied their rights as American citizens. His letter to John C. Calhoun testifies to this scorn, as does his recommendation that the federal Constitution be amended to provide capital punishment for any public official who refused to assist those denied their constitutional rights, and as does his own decision to run for the Presidency. In his journal he noted: "The state rights doctrines are what feed mobs. They are a dead carcass — a stink and they shall ascend up as a stink offering in the nose of the Almighty."¹ Perhaps better than eloquence, this earthy characterization of what he considered to be a corruption of federalism reflects his contempt for those who used political abstractions as excuses for not granting justice to his people.

One must be careful here. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith wished to abandon federalism, which is one of the basic concepts of the American Constitution. What he wanted apparently was a definition of federalism which would assure protection of individual rights. What he faced, as we do today, was the task of defining within the framework of the American Constitution the jurisdiction of these two governments so as to help them each become efficient and responsive servants of the people. It was clear, I think, to Joseph

¹Joseph Smith, *Documentary History of the Church*, Vol. VI (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1948), 95.

Smith, as it certainly must be to us, that an effective federal system rests on the willingness and ability of local governments to outstrip, not lag behind, the national government in the protection of individual rights, the promotion of the general welfare, and in the courage to assume the financial burdens which these tasks require.

A careful reading of the platform will reveal, however, that Joseph Smith was opposed to those who used the cause of "human rights" to promote special interests. He denounced the abolitionists who even in 1844 were fanning the fires of civil conflict; he saw the ultimate outcome of their actions and sensed that for some the cause of abolition was less a commitment to "human rights" than a path to fame, popularity, and power. Thus he balanced, as we must, a deep concern for the fundamental rights of all men with an awareness that all good causes can be used by men with "hidden agendas" for their own purposes. No less timely now than it was in 1844 is his recognition that if good causes are not to be exploited then the "establishment" must give more than just lip service to the cause of equal rights within the framework of the Constitution.

The economic plank of Joseph Smith's platform consists of two proposals: a "judicious tariff" and the creation of a national bank with the capital stock owned by the federal government. This bank would have branches in the several states, and the stock of each branch would be owned by the appropriate state government. These proposals flow from the Prophet's belief that "when the people are secure and their right properly respected then the four main pillars of prosperity—viz., agriculture, manufactures, navigation, and commerce, need the fostering care of government" In 1844 Joseph Smith thought "fostering care" required a national bank and the protection of infant industries; it does not seem implausible that in 1968 "fostering care" may well include monetary and fiscal policies designed to steer the economy between the twin evils of inflation and depression. I think it also not unreasonable to suggest that despite the Prophet's proposal for a national bank owned by the national government, the concept of "fostering care" generally looks to policies which create an environment in which the "pillars of prosperity" can flourish rather than to direct government ownership. Also implicit in this concept, I believe, is a recognition that even though men are willing and able to work, economic factors beyond their control may rob them of their livelihood. Government must, therefore, adopt policies motivated by the spirit of "fostering care" so that a vigorous and developing economy will provide employment opportunities for all men; the goal is the creation of opportunities for meaningful labor, without which there can be no individual self-respect or community stability. In one respect the Prophet's 1844 platform might well have been taken from a modern political platform; he insisted on the principle of economy and efficiency in government. Believing as he did that the people were sovereign, he saw so reason why the sovereign's affairs should not be conducted as prudently as private affairs. His immediate proposal was to reduce the size of the House of Representatives, and to require economy in the operation of both state and national government. The need for improvement in the

administration of the public's business is as real today as it was in 1844. Despite the reforms in the public services and governmental organization which have been instituted since Joseph Smith's day, the problems which confront government have grown in number and complexity and threaten always to out-run our ability to cope with them. Therefore, in addition to integrity, honesty, and impartiality, we must demand competence and devotion to the public welfare from public administrators. The bureaucracy is a favorite whipping boy for any number of political opportunists, but we should not let our disdain of irresponsible criticisms of government officials blind us to the really crucial need for improvement in the caliber of our public servants. I am tempted to suggest that given the complexity of our problems we are an underdeveloped country when it comes to finding public administrators at all levels of government equal to the tasks they face. We must realistically recognize also that governmental officials are not immune to temptation and that their access to more and better information than the average citizen may lead them to think of themselves as an elite, immune from popular control. If government officials are to resist this temptation they must be imbued with the values of a democratic society so that not only external restraints but also a deep commitment to the political values of our society turn their heads and hearts from the pursuit of power to the service of the people.

There is another aspect of the Prophet's concern for effective government which must be noted. A strong undercurrent in the platform is resentment that justice depended in 1844 not so much upon the equal protection of the laws as on the wealth and power of the litigants. We can no more be blind today to the need for equal justice than could the Prophet. While many of the abuses of which he complained no longer exist in the crass form he noted, still injustice has not been expunged totally from our public life. We must share Joseph Smith's passion for equal justice until that goal is a living reality.

The foreign affairs plank of the Prophet's platform called for the bringing of Oregon and Texas into the Union. Underlying this proposal was Joseph Smith's belief that the principles of liberty on which the American political system rests and which are given concrete expression in the Constitution, are universal principles which can benefit all the world. "Come—yea, come Texas, come Mexico, come Canada; and come, all the world: let us be brethren, let us be one great family and let there be universal peace." I assume that this hope for peace and this plea for unity on the principles of liberty remains as meaningful today as the Prophet found it in 1844. He was not interested in international integration at any price, for he realized that governments are after all only the superstructure which reflects the underlying values of society. What Joseph sought in his day was agreement on those values, and where such agreement existed the traditional limits of the nation might be widened to include all "sons of liberty." There are those who will interpret the Prophet's vision of the family of man as suggesting support for international government. For myself I am more cautious: I think the Prophet would have been unimpressed with mechanical solutions to international conflict which did not reflect a real community of values. His idealism was always tempered by a

deep appreciation of the limits which our imperfect world imposes on the aspirations of men. But where deep and abiding agreement on fundamental political values exists among nations, I am inclined to think that the Prophet would have welcomed bold and imaginative policies which promised to hasten the day when mankind would be united as one great family. We can do no less.

There are two proposals in the platform which seem strange to us as we struggle with the problem of crime in the streets and a growing problem of desertion from the armed forces. These are the planks on penal reform: Joseph Smith wanted to abolish most prisons — and courts martial. He proposed that deserters be given their pay and discharged, never again to merit the nation's trust. Whatever one thinks of these specific proposals, they reflect the Prophet's sensitivity to social problems, as does his concern over slavery; and across the years the message is clear — be anxiously engaged in a good cause. We do not fight the social ills Joseph Smith fought, or the ones our grandfathers fought, nor those of our fathers; we have our own with which to do combat. What we do have in common with our forefathers is the responsibility to improve society for all men. Complacency, smugness, indifference, neglect have no more place in our lives than they did in theirs. Every Mormon knows, "he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant," and we have no less authority than the Lord for that truth. And are we not under the obligation to seek after all that is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy"? Ending the evils of the penal system and the practice of court martial for desertion were the "good causes" which engaged Joseph Smith. What our "good causes" will be depends on the lens through which we view the world. But no Latter-day Saint is worthy of the name who has not searched his own heart, as the Prophet did his, and found a good work to which along with his service to the Church he can commit himself wholeheartedly.

The review of American history which the Prophet undertakes as an introduction to his platform includes quotations from a number of former Presidents. I think the choice of these quotations reveals much about Joseph Smith's political views, and because they seem to me to be relevant to our problems, I should like to call attention to one or two. First the quotation from Washington, which makes two points: (1) that the general interest should be given precedence over "local prejudices or attachments," over "separate views" and "party animosities"; (2) that private morality should be the fundamental basis of national policy. (Fully in this tradition was the General Conference address of Elder Mark E. Peterson at April Conference, 1968.) I can only surmise that Joseph Smith found the first quote particularly telling after hearing time and time again that "states' rights" barred the way to justice for the Mormons expelled from their homes in Missouri. The second, of course, is the message of the Gospel that the measure of creation is man and that unless private morality exists all efforts to achieve social justice must necessarily fall short of their mark.

A quotation from John Adams strikes a particularly responsive chord in our hearts today: "If national pride is ever justifiable or excusable, it is when

it springs not from *power*, or riches, grandeur or glory, but from conviction of national innocence, information and benevolence." In a day when our power, riches, glory and grandeur surpass those of all other nations, not only of our own day, but of all history, perhaps we might well ask What have we achieved if these are the only sources of our national pride? What would our answer be to the Prophet if he should appear to inquire if we also excel in "national innocence, information and benevolence"?

One last point: Joseph Smith was a Prophet engaged in a secular political contest. He entered that contest on terms dictated by the American political system. His presidential platform was a secular document couched in the political language of his day; he presented himself to the American people on his merits as a man and on the relevance of his political views to the problems of the day. In no place in the platform does he assert that he is speaking in the name of the Lord; he promises only to supplicate the Lord for the good of the people. Joseph Smith was willing to enter the political contest of his day on these terms and in this spirit; we all might well ponder his example.



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