GOVERNOR THOMAS FORD AND THE MURDERERS OF JOSEPH SMITH

Keith Huntress

Keith Huntress, Professor of English at the Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, analyzes an important but little known figure from early L.D.S. history — Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois at the time Joseph Smith was killed.

I

Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois from 1842 to 1846, saved the credit of the state, fought bravely against financial and civil chaos, wrote "one of the two or three remarkable books written in the state during the formative period,"[1] worked through his last illness in a courageous endeavor to leave some kind of estate to his children — and is remembered only as one of the villains in a drama far greater than his own. Ford was a perceptive and intelligent man; dying, he foresaw what his ultimate reputation would be. Toward the end of his *History of Illinois* he wrote,

> . . . the author of this history feels degraded by the reflection, that the humble governor of an obscure state, who would otherwise be forgotten in a few years, stands a fair chance, like Pilate and Herod, by their official connection with the true religion, of being dragged down to posterity with an immortal name, hitched on to the memory of a miserable impostor.[2]

Many judgments of Ford's conduct during the struggle in Hancock County in 1844–1845 have been moderately or severely critical.[3] Fawn Brodie

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[1]T. C. Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818–1848* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg Co., 1922), p. 316.

[2]Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois, from its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. Griggs & Co., 1854), p. 360.

[3]See, for instance, George T. M. Davis, *An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph*

condemns Ford as "weak."[4] John Hay said that he was "plagued by the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet."[5] Though Joseph Smith himself relied upon Governor Ford for protection, and seemed not unfriendly to a man who, he wrote, "treats us honorably," and "continues his courtesies," the opinion of the Mormons after the Smith murders was strongly condemnatory. The governor was accused of ignoring warnings of the evil intentions of the militia — an accusation certainly correct — and of being party to the murder plot.

It is easy to condemn Governor Ford for his conduct at the time of the murders. He was the chief executive of the state, he was on the scene, and yet the murders took place. But few people realize or realized the difficulties under which he labored. Any full study of the murders of the Smiths must consider the society which demanded and condoned those murders, and the conditions, so different from our own, within which that society operated. In that June of 1844 Governor Thomas Ford faced really insuperable difficulties.

II

In 1842 the state of Illinois was still frontier territory, facing all the troubles of a changing and expanding society with few settled traditions, financial or social, from which to operate. A series of sanguine speculations and an almost unbelievably rickety financial structure had resulted in a state government that was bankrupt in everything but hope and name. When Ford was elected governor in 1842,

> . . . the state was in debt about $14,000,000 for moneys wasted upon internal improvements and in banking; the domestic treasury of the state was in arrears $313,000 for the ordinary expenses of government; auditors' warrants were freely selling at a discount of fifty percent; the people were unable to pay even moderate taxes to replenish the treasury, in which not one cent was contained even to pay postage to and from the public offices; . . . the banks, upon which the people had relied for a currency, had become insolvent, their paper had fallen so low as to cease to circulate as money, and yet no other money had taken its place, leaving the people wholly destitute of a circulating medium, and universally in debt. . . .[7]

This lack of a circulating medium of exchange is made more vivid by Ford's testimony that the half-million or so people of Illinois in 1842 possessed only two or three hundred thousand dollars in good money, about fifty cents apiece on the average, "which occasioned a general inability to

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Smith . . . (St. Louis, 1844), pp. 18–19, 32, 39; John S. Fullmer, *Assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith* . . . (Liverpool, 1855), pp. 9–12; Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell* . . . (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966), pp. 129, 135.

[4]Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945), p. 388.

[5]John Hay, "The Mormon Prophet's Tragedy," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1869, p. 673.

[6]B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Deseret Book Co., 1962), VI, 565, 609.

[7]Ford, *History of Illinois*, p. 445. The accuracy of Ford's description is supported generally by Pease, *The Frontier State* . . . , and in Alexander Davidson and Bernard Stuve, *A Complete History of Illinois from 1673 to 1873* (Springfield: Illinois Journal Company, 1874), pp. 465 and *passim*.

pay taxes."[8] The Mormons in Nauvoo were continually recording difficulties in collecting a couple of dollars, or even fifty cents, in good money, and Robert Flanders has noted[9] that bonds for deeds and other evidences of land ownership were commonly used as currency in Nauvoo. This simple lack of an acceptable currency made difficult business transactions of ordinary life, encouraged counterfeiting, and made possible all kinds of chicanery.

Another major problem of the state was transportation. The Mississippi was a great highroad, but the interior of the state was a wilderness of trails and rutted lanes. In 1841, on a day when the price of wheat was one dollar a bushel in Chicago, the price in Peoria was forty cents.[10] Springfield is but one hundred miles from Nauvoo, yet the *Sangamo Journal* for July 4, 1844, a week after the murders of the Smiths, reported only rumors of troubles in Hancock County. The railroads and the telegraph were only a few years away, but in 1844 the tired horseman and the mired wagon could have stood for symbols of the state.

The cow-town Westerns of the movies and television have almost obscured the fact that violence was a major factor on the American frontier long before Dodge City and Tombstone. Illinois' history was typical enough. The almost legendary bandits of Cave-in-Rock were eliminated early in the century, and in 1816 and 1817 regulators had whipped and run out of the state rogues who, according to Ford, had included sheriffs, justices of the peace, and even judges.[11] But as late as 1831 a gang almost controlled Pope and Massac counties, and even built a fort which had to be taken by storm by a small army of regulators. In 1837 occurred the better-known riots at Alton. A mob threw into the river the press of the *Alton Observer*, an Abolition newspaper published by Elijah Lovejoy. Lovejoy and a member of the mob were killed in a subsequent clash, and a second press destroyed. At about the same time Ogle, Winnebago, Lee, and De Kalb counties all suffered from "organized bands of rogues, engaged in murders, robberies, horse-stealling, and in making and passing counterfeit money."[12]

In 1841 in Ogle County a family of criminals named Driscoll shot down a Captain Campbell, of the respectables of the county, before the eyes of his family. Driscoll and one of his sons were convicted of the murder by a kangaroo court. "They were placed in a kneeling position, with bandages over their eyes, and were fired upon by the whole company present, that there might be none who could be legal witnesses of the bloody deed. About one hundred of these men were afterwards tried for the murder and acquitted. These terrible measures put an end to the ascendancy of the rogues in Ogle County."[13]

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[8]Davidson and Stuve, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

[9]Robert B. Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965) p. 127.

[10]Pease, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

[11]Ford, *op. cit.*, pp. 232–33.

[12]Ford, *Ibid.*, p. 246.

[13]Ford, *Ibid.*, pp. 248–49.

One would think that the violence at Carthage Jail in 1844 would have sickened the people of the state, but the conflicts that followed in Hancock County were by no means the only disturbances to trouble Governor Ford. Another small civil war took place in Pope and Massac counties in 1846. The militia of Union County, called in to keep the peace, refused to protect the suspected bandits and left the counties to the government of regulators, who, as always, began by terrorizing known criminals, moved to threatening the suspected, and ended hated and feared by honest and peaceful men.

> A party of about twenty regulators went to the house of an old man named Mathis. . . . He and his wife resisted the arrest. The old woman being unusually strong and active, knocked down one or two of the party with her fists. A gun was then presented to her breast accompanied by a threat of blowing her heart out if she continued her resistance. She caught the gun and shoved it downwards, when it went off and shot her through the thigh. . . . The party captured old man Mathis, and carried him away with them, since which time he has not been heard of, but is supposed to have been murdered.[14]

Of Hancock County itself Ford wrote: "I had a good opportunity to know the early settlers of Hancock county. I had attended the circuit courts there as States-attorney, from 1830, when the county was first organized, up to the year 1834; and to my certain knowledge the early settlers, with some honorable exceptions, were, in popular language, hard cases."[15]

All of these citations, and they could be multiplied, show clearly that the murders at Carthage Jail fitted a fairly common pattern. The people of Hancock County, of a good many places in Illinois in 1844, were not horrified at the idea of taking the law into their own hands. That had been done before by neighbors and friends, and would be done again. Thomas Ford was trying to govern a state without money, without effective transportation, and with no effective way of rallying public support in areas of the state not directly involved in the Mormon troubles. In a society where violence becomes commonplace, domestic peace must largely depend upon speed of communication and transportation. Local feuds, riots, even revolts, are best handled by forces not themselves directly involved and therefore relatively objective in their actions. In 1844, in Hancock County, the non-Mormons were bitter partisans, and *they* were judges, jury — and executioners.

We have enough violence, of course, in our own time, with wars declared and undeclared, and with demonstrations, riots, and assassinations. But there are differences. Our acts of violence tend to be the result of pitting group against government of some kind, or individuals against individuals. In Illinois in the 1840s the conflicts were between groups, or between groups on one side and individuals on the other. Today there is a tacit understanding that the government, using the National Guard or the Army, can always repress group violence if it becomes too threatening; in the mid-nineteenth

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[14]Ford, *op. cit.*, p. 442.
[15]Ford, *Ibid.*, p. 406.

century the central government left these problems to the states, and the state governments were frequently almost powerless or were strongly partisan on one side or the other of each conflict.

III

If we search for causes of these resorts to violence in Illinois, there is no lack of possibilities. Criminals are always with us, quick to take advantage of weakness in government, of unstable currency, of flimsy jails, of poor communications. And common crime is not only harmful in itself; it begets crime through success — and through retribution.

Another cause for violence may well have been simple boredom, with its concomitant yearning for any kind of action. Anyone who reads the letters and records of the mid-nineteenth century is struck by how often a writer dropped whatever he had in hand and set off on some vaguely motivated journey, and by how easy it always was to attract a crowd.

William Daniels, who wrote an eyewitness account of the Smith murders, began his story:

> I resided in Augusta, Hancock county, Ill., eighteen miles from Carthage. On the 16th of June I left my home with the intention of going to St. Louis. . . .
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> The next morning a company of men were going from . . . [Warsaw] to Carthage, for the purpose, as they said, of assisting the militia to drive the Mormons out of the country. Out of curiosity, as I had no particular way to spend my time. . . ."[16]

Daniels, setting out from his home on the sixteenth of June, was a witness of the murders eleven days later, and apparently never did arrive in St. Louis.

Sheriff J. B. Backenstos supplied a list of those whom he supposed to have been active in the "massacre at Carthage."[17] Backenstos was not present at the murders and was using hearsay in these accusations, which could not have been proved in court. He listed about sixty men as active participants. Of these sixty, six are listed as having "no business," two as "land sharks," one as "loafer," and one Major W. B. Warren as "a damned villain" — apparently his full-time occupation. Out of about sixty men, ten apparently had no occupation known to the sheriff, and ten others were farmers at a season of the year when farming might have been expected to take all of a man's time.

The best pictures of the boredom, the deep inner need for excitement, for some kind of action, are in the writings of Mark Twain. Twain grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, a river town close to Warsaw and Nauvoo. One of the most famous passages of American writing, and one of the best, could have been a description of Warsaw, though it was Hannibal that Mark Twain wrote of:

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[16]William M. Daniels, *A Correct Account of the Murder of Generals Joseph and Hyrum Smith . . .* (Nauvoo, 1845), p. 4.

[17]Roberts, ed., *op. cit.*, VII, pp. 143–44.

> After all these years I can picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then; the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning; the streets empty, or pretty nearly so; one or two clerks sitting in front of the Water Street stores, with their splint-bottomed chairs tilted back against the walls, chins on breasts, hats slouched over their faces, asleep — with shingle shavings enough around to show what broke them down; a sow and a litter of pigs loafing along the sidewalk, doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds; two or three lonely little freight piles scattered about the "levee"; a pile of "skids" on the slope of the stone-paved wharf, and the fragrant town drunkard asleep in the shadow of them . . . . Presently a film of dark smoke appears . . . instantly a Negro drayman, famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, "S-t-e-a-mboat a-comin' " and the scene changes! The town drunkard stirs, the clerks wake up, a furious clatter of drays follows, every house and store pours out a human contribution, and all in a twinkling the dead town is alive and moving. . . . Ten minutes later the steamer is under way again, with no flag on the jack-staff and no black smoke issuing from the chimneys. After ten more minutes the town is dead again and the town drunkard asleep by the skids once more.[18]

In *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain shows us a town in Arkansas, but the description, and particularly the bored cruelty at the conclusion, fit into the picture of possibilities for violence in any Mississippi river town:

> There were empty drygoods boxes under the awnings and loafers roosting on them all day long, whittling them with their Barlow knives and chawing tobacco and gaping and yawning and stretching — a mighty ornery lot. . . . You'd see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs . . . and pretty soon you'd hear a loafer sing out, "Hi! *so* boy! sick him, Tige!" and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear and three or four dozen more a-coming, and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise. Then they'd settle back again till there was a dog-fight. There couldn't anything wake them up all over and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight — unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death.[19]

From September 1845 until well into the spring of 1846 a substantial part of the population of Hancock County seems to have done little except to harass the Mormons.[20] If only the loafers and poor farmers had been bitter against the people of Nauvoo, the Mormons could perhaps have lived on in Hancock County without very great problems, but the respectables of Warsaw and Carthage made common cause with the "butcher boys." The new religion was feared and condemned, of course, since any new religion

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[18]Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood Co., 1883), pp. 63–65.

[19]Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958; Riverside Edition), pp. 117–19.

[20]Hosea Stout, *On the Mormon Frontier*, ed. Juanita Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), I, pp. 64–117.

is necessarily built upon a belief in the inadequacy of established tenets, but Nauvoo was also a threat to Warsaw's trade and to Carthage's position as county seat.[21] When it became obvious that Nauvoo's voters were a bloc to be directed as he chose by Joseph Smith, and when the Prophet declared himself a candidate for the Presidency, the old settlers united against the new. The Mormons, strangers and isolates, had to face a county, a population, accustomed to the idea of violence, contemptuous of government, filled with hate, and armed.

IV

It was deeply ironical that the beginning of the end came with the destruction of the press of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. In Alton, a few years before, the mob had twice destroyed presses belonging to the Abolitionist Lovejoy. They rioted against the freedom of the press. In Nauvoo the Mormons did the destroying, and the mob rioted for the freedom of the press. In truth, of course, the mob cared nothing for the abstract freedom of the Bill of Rights; it hated Abolitionists and Mormons, and did them both to death.

Governor Ford first became closely involved with the Mormon troubles on June 17, 1844, when a committee of men from Carthage waited on him in Springfield and asked that the militia of the state be called out to keep the peace in Hancock County. There was reason for their fear. The Mormons had destroyed the press of the *Expositor* on June 10; the very next day a mass meeting at Carthage adopted the following resolutions:

> *Resolved* . . . that we hold ourselves at all times in readiness to cooperate with our fellow citizens in this state, Missouri, and Iowa, to *exterminate* — UTTERLY EXTERMINATE, the wicked and abominable Mormon leaders, the authors of our troubles.
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> *Resolved* . . . that the time, in our opinion, has arrived when the adherents of Smith as a body, shall be driven from the surrounding settlements into Nauvoo; that the Prophet and his miscreant adherents should then be demanded at their hands, and if not surrendered, A WAR OF EXTERMINATION SHOULD BE WAGED, to the entire destruction if necessary for our protection, of his adherents.[22]

Ford, listening to the delegation from Carthage, made the first of three fateful decisions; he would go to Carthage and see himself what the situation was. This was a perfectly sensible thing to do, but it made possible the murders of the Smiths. If the governor had stayed in Springfield the Smiths would not have surrendered; only Ford's personal guarantee of protection persuaded Joseph Smith to ride to Carthage and give himself into custody.

Ford had to find out what the situation was, but Joseph Smith was under no illusions as to the attitude and plans of the mob. When Ford, after hear-

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[21]Brodie, *op. cit.*, pp. 258–59; Flanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 102, 307.

[22]Roberts, ed., *op. cit.*, VII, 123.

ing the Mormon side of the *Expositor* affair, demanded that the Smiths surrender to the magistrate at Carthage, Joseph Smith stated the situation very accurately, and appealingly, in a letter dated June 22, 1844:

> . . . we would not hesitate to stand another trial according to your Excellency's wish, were it not that we are confident our lives would be in danger. We dare not come. Writs, we are assured, are issued against us in various parts of the country. For what? To drag us from place to place, from court to court, across the creeks and prairies, till some bloodthirsty villain could find his opportunity to shoot us down. We dare not come, though your Excellency promises protection. Yet, at the same time, you have expressed fears that you could not control the mob, in which case we are left to the mercy of the merciless. Sir, we dare not come, for our lives would be in danger, and we are guilty of no crime.
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> You say, "It will be against orders to be accompanied by others if we come to trial." This we have been obliged to act upon in Missouri; and when our witnesses were sent for by the court (as your honor promises to do) they were thrust into prison, and we left without witnesses. Sir, you must not blame us, for "a burnt child dreads the fire." And although your Excellency might be well-disposed in the matter, the appearance of the mob forbids our coming. We dare not do it.[23]

Joseph Smith's plan to leave for the far West, his crossing the river to Montrose, and his final decision to return and give himself up to the law were crucial for his life but were unknown to Governor Ford, who would probably have been best pleased had that plan been followed.

The Smiths arrived in Carthage at about midnight, June 24–25. They were exhibited to the militia the next day, were charged with riot — the *Expositor* case — and were released on bail. Joseph and Hyrum Smith were immediately rearrested on a trumped-up charge of treason,[24] and were *not* released on bail; they were committed to the county jail "for greater security."

At this point Ford made his second crucial decision: he did not interfere in the jailing of the Smiths. In his *History* Ford gives a detailed explanation which is persuasive as to the technical legality of the charges and of his position, but which has little to do with the facts of the matter and the murderous intention of the mob. The magistrate in Carthage refused to accept bail on the charge of treason, and, without the kind of hearing required by law, committed the Smiths to jail in the midst of their enemies. A different kind of governor might have overborne the magistrate and freed the Smiths, but Ford had been a lawyer and a judge. He felt that, as governor, he was only another citizen of the state, with peculiar responsibilities, of course, but with those responsibilities sharply delimited. "In all this matter," wrote Ford,

> the justice of the peace and constable, though humble in office, were acting in a high and independent capacity, far beyond any legal

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[23]Roberts, ed., *op cit.*, VI, 540.

[24]For declaring martial law in Nauvoo and calling out the Nauvoo Legion. But when Ford arrived in Carthage he discovered that the militia had been called out by the constables. No one ever suggested that the constables be arrested for treason.

> power in me to control. I considered that the executive power could only be called in to assist, and not to dictate or control their action; that in the humble sphere of their duties they were as independent, and clothed with as high authority by the law, as the executive department; and that my province was simply to aid them with the force of the State.[25]

A more forceful and less legalistic chief executive could almost certainly have freed the Smiths; indeed, Ford wrote of the planned trip to Nauvoo on June 27. "I had determined to prevail on the justice to bring out his prisoners and take them along."[26] If he could have persuaded the magistrate to release the prisoners on the twenty-seventh, he could have done the same thing on the twenty-fifth. But this begs the question. A more forceful and less legalistic chief executive would have been likely, in those times, to have been more violently anti-Mormon than was Ford. Governor Boggs of Missouri would probably not have hesitated to override a magistrate, but neither would he have hesitated to authorize the killing of the Smiths.

Once the prisoners were in Carthage Jail, events moved rapidly to the tragic ending. Visitors came and went; a pair of pistols was left with the prisioners; there was something of the feeling of a state of siege. Ford told Joseph Smith that he could not interfere with the slow — and in this case partial — process of the law. Ford had planned to take the Smiths to Nauvoo if he went there on the twenty-seventh, but on that morning the governor changed his mind — and this was his third crucial decision. He wrote, "I had determined to prevail on the justice to bring out his prisoners, and take them along. A council of officers, however, determined that this would be highly inexpedient and dangerous, and offered such substantial reasons for their opinions as induced me to change my resolution."[27]

It is interesting and significant that in his *History* Ford passed over this decision as rapidly as possible, did not give the "substantial reasons" of the officers, and moved immediately to the story of the expedition. Had the Smiths been taken to Nauvoo they might have been shot on the road, or they might have been killed in a trumped-up attack in Nauvoo if the original plan to take the whole militia to that city had been followed. That would have meant war. If the Smiths had been taken along with the small company that finally made the journey, they might very well have been kidnapped by the Nauvoo Legion. It is hard to believe that had the Smiths once returned to Nauvoo they would have been willing to come back to Carthage and the jail; they had seen and heard the mob and knew what justice to expect from everyone but the governor.

The rest of the story is familiar to anyone who has studied Mormon history. The governor, having decided to leave the Smiths in jail, ordered almost all the militia to be disbanded. He left with a small force for Nauvoo, where he made a hurried speech to the assembled citizens and exacted a pledge

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[25]Ford, *op. cit.*, p. 338.
[26]*Ibid.*, p. 340.
[27]*Ibid.*

against violence. In the meantime the militia from Warsaw had marched north toward Golden's Point and had been met "at the shanties" with the governor's order to disband, and the news that the governor had left Carthage for Nauvoo and that the Smiths were still in Carthage Jail. John Hay's retelling of the story is probably accurate; his father was with the troops and knew all the men, and the story must have been told and retold in Warsaw:

> Colonel Williams read the Governor's order . . . Captain Grover soon found himself without a company. Captain Aldrich essayed a speech calling for volunteers for Carthage. "He did not make a fair start," says the chronicle [it would be interesting to know what *chronicle* Hay referred to] "and Sharp came up and took it off his hands. Sharp, being a spirited and impressive talker, soon had a respectable squad about him. . . ." The speeches of Grover and Sharp were rather vague; the purpose of murder does not seem to have been hinted. They protested against "being made the tools and puppets of Tommy Ford." They were going to Carthage to see the boys and talk things over. . . .
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> While they were waiting at the shanties, a courier came in from the Carthage Grays. It is impossible at this day to declare exactly the purport of his message. It is usually reported and believed that he brought an assurance from the officer of this company that they would be found on guard at the jail where the Smiths were confined; that they would make no real resistance — merely enough to save appearances.[28]

And so the men from Warsaw, led by Sharp, Grover, and Davis, and welcomed by the Carthage Grays under Frank Worrell, rushed the jail, disarmed the guard, and murdered Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Governor Ford heard the news when he met messengers two miles outside of Nauvoo; for safety's sake he took the two messengers with him back to Carthage, so that the knowledge of the murders would be kept from the people of Nauvoo as long as possible.

Everyone expected a war. The anti-Mormons had been violent enough, and the Mormons had been accused by their enemies so often of being bloodthirsty outlaws that the accusers had come to believe their own lies. In this case, the Mormons quite typically followed the advice of John Taylor, and kept the peace. But Ford, expecting the worst, felt that he could trust neither the Mormons nor the murdering Gentiles, and retreated to Quincy in a panic.[29] His feelings about the murders he put into a letter to Nauvoo, of July 22, 1844:

> The naked truth then is, that most well informed persons condemn in the most unqualified manner the mode in which the Smiths were put to death, but nine out of every ten of such accompany the expression of their disapprobation by a manifestation of their pleasure that they are dead.

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[28]Hay, *op. cit.*, p. 674.

[29]An unpublished manuscript by a Mrs. Marsh of Carthage, kindly sent to me by Professor Douglas Wilson of Knox College, gives a quite different picture of Ford's flight from that which he himself gives in his *History*. Ford was apparently not physically courageous, which may have been one of the determining factors in the whole tragedy.

> The disapproval is most unusually cold and without feeling . . . called for by decency, by a respect for the laws and a horror of mobs, but does not flow warm from the heart.
>
> The unfortunate victims . . . were generally and thoroughly hated throughout the country, and it is not reasonable to suppose that their deaths has produced any reaction in the public mind resulting in active sympathy; if you think so, you are mistaken.[30]

Ford obviously foresaw the continuing persecution which resulted in the Mormon War of 1845 and the evacuation of Nauvoo.

V

How far, then, can Governor Ford be held responsible for the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith?

Ford arrived at Carthage on the morning of June 21. He discovered that Hancock County was already at the point of civil war, with approximately 1,700 men of the combined militia threatening to attack Nauvoo, which was defended by the Nauvoo Legion, 2,000 strong. His first act was to place the men of the militia under their regular officers and to get pledges of support from those officers. He then demanded the surrender of the Smiths for their part in the *Expositor* affair, which was the immediate cause of the threatened struggle. He then asked for and received the state arms from the Nauvoo Legion. After the Smiths were committed to jail, Ford met with the officers of the militia to consult on the next steps to be taken. He disbanded the militia, rode to Nauvoo with a small party, and pleaded with the Mormons to keep the peace. Then he was faced with the fact of the murders.

It seems obvious that Ford's primary concern was not to save the Smiths but to avoid civil war. He felt that he had to push for the surrender of the Smiths partly because of the legal requirement, but also because their immunity from punishment after the *Expositor* affair made furious the old settlers of Hancock County. He first put the militia under their regular officers in an attempt to enforce discipline, and then, finding the officers as bad as the men, discharged almost the whole militia, feeling that they would be less dangerous as individuals and that many would return to their homes. He took the state arms from the Nauvoo Legion in order to relieve the fears of the old settlers, and then discovered that those fears were mainly pretended and that the old settlers themselves were the real danger. Ford felt a responsibility for the Smiths — he had guaranteed their safety — but when he had to choose between leaving the Smiths and making another effort for peace he chose to meet what he thought was his first responsibility.

No one can tell what *might* have happened, but there seems every reason to believe that if Ford had stayed in Springfield and the Smiths had remained at Nauvoo, civil war would have occurred; that if Ford had arranged for the Smiths to escape to Nauvoo, civil war would have occurred; that if Ford had taken the Smiths with him to Nauvoo, civil war would have occurred. He did none of these things, and civil war occurred. The old settlers of Han-

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[30]Roberts, ed., *op. cit.*, VII, 204.

cock County did not want peace and would not have peace. Hay reports of the Warsaw militia on the last grim march to Carthage, "These trudged . . . towards the town where the cause of all the trouble and confusion of the last few years awaited them. . . . The farther they walked the more the idea impressed itself upon them that now was the time to finish the matter totally. The avowed design of the leaders communicated itself magnetically to the men, until the whole company became fused into one mass of bloodthirsty energy."[31]

Those writers who have called Ford weak, and who have pointed out, quite correctly, that he changed his mind during those last days of Carthage, have never suggested just what Ford should have done to save the Smiths and prevent the war. The governor tried almost everything in his endeavor to keep the peace; it was not his fault that nothing worked.

The mob wanted Joseph Smith dead and the Mormons out of Illinois. Even after the Smiths were killed and the Mormons leaderless, civil war broke out the next year and the Mormons were finally expelled. The lesson that Thomas Ford learned is given in his *History*:

> In framing our governments, it seemed to be the great object of our ancestors to secure the public liberty by depriving government of power. Attacks upon liberty were not anticipated from any considerable portion of the people themselves. It was not expected that one portion of the people would attempt to play the tyrant over another. And if such a thing had been thought of, the only mode of putting it down was to call out the militia, who are, nine times out of ten, partisans on one side or the other in the contest. The militia may be relied upon to do battle in a popular service, but if mobs are raised to drive out horse thieves, to put down claim-jumpers, to destroy an abolition press, or to expel an odious sect, the militia cannot be brought to act against them efficiently. *The people cannot be used to put down the people.*[32]

Ford failed to save the lives of the Smiths, and he failed to prevent civil war. It is doubtful whether anyone, given that time, that place, those people, could have succeeded.

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[31]Hay, *op. cit.*, p. 674.

[32]Ford, *op. cit.*, p. 249. My italics.