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A Prophet-Statesman
Joseph Smith in the Public Square

Near the end of Joseph Smith's life, the Lord commanded him to "make a solemn proclamation . . . to all the kings of the world, to the four corners thereof, . . . and to all nations of the earth" (D&C 124:2–3; revealed January 19, 1841). However, the Prophet was martyred at Carthage in 1844 before this proclamation could be made.

The year following the Prophet's death, the Quorum of the Twelve fulfilled the commandment by producing a sixteen-page proclamation addressed to rulers and people of all nations. The document contained a startling announcement that God had spoken from the heavens and had restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth. It issued several warnings about future events and invited all who were interested to assist in building up the kingdom of God on the earth in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Further, the Council of the Twelve prophetically declared, "As this work progresses

in its onward course, and becomes more and more an object of *political and religious interest*, . . . no king, ruler, or subject, no community or individual, will stand neutral. All will . . . be influenced by one spirit or the other; and will take sides either for or against the kingdom of God.”¹

Why would The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints become an object of increasing political interest? Astounding as that declaration may seem, the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith regarding government will yet play a significant role in future political affairs throughout the world. Political leaders in all lands can and will yet benefit from Joseph Smith’s teachings about leadership in the public square. The insights and revelations Joseph received regarding leadership in government are as interesting as they are important and timely.

Divinely Inspired Tutorials

Although he was deprived of educational opportunities in his youth, Joseph Smith was tutored in the principles of politics in a most unusual manner. From seventeen years of age, and for the following six years, Joseph was instructed by the angel Moroni on at least twenty-two separate occasions.² Moroni taught Joseph about the ancient inhabitants of the Americas, their politics, and social structure. Of this remarkable experience, Joseph’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, commented:

From this time forth Joseph continued to receive instructions from time to time, and every evening we gathered our children together and gave our time up to the discussion of those things which he instructed to us. I think that we presented the most peculiar aspect of any family that ever lived upon the earth, all seated in a circle, father, mother, sons, and daughters, listening in breathless anxiety to the religious teachings of a boy eighteen years of age. . . .

In the course of our evening conversations, Joseph gave us some of the most amusing recitals which could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this

continent, their dress, their manner of traveling, the animals which they rode, the cities that they built, and the structure of their buildings with every particular, their mode of warfare, and their religious worship as specifically as though he had spent his life with them.³

Thus Joseph Smith learned by communications from heaven, from time to time, of past cultures, leaders, and governments. Two years later, while translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph learned in greater detail about ancient political philosophies and gained inspired insights into government affairs and organization. Book of Mormon authors recorded warnings about how and why kings inevitably turn into tyrants and dictators (see 2 Nephi 5:18; Mosiah 23:7–9; 29:13, 16–24, 35–36; Alma 46:9) and that the Lord would not suffer kings to reign on the American continent (see 2 Nephi 10:11). They also described how it had been divinely decreed that God would raise a mighty nation on the American continent in the latter days which would eventually bless all humankind (1 Nephi 22:7–9). The most significant prophecy about this mighty nation is that it would be free—meaning it was to be a land of liberty and freedom (see 3 Nephi 21:4).

The ancients also warned that that great nation would be established on a “covenant continent.” To remain free on that land, its inhabitants would be required to obey the God of the land. The Book of Mormon describes two previous nations “swept clean” from the land for failure to keep this covenant. To avoid their fate, they wrote, we must learn from their mistakes and honor the God of the land:

For behold, this is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off; for it is the everlasting decree of God. And it is not until the fulness of iniquity among the children of the land, that they are swept off.

And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent, and not

continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done.

Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written. (Ether 2:10–12; see also Ether 8:20–26; Mormon 5:9–6:22; Moroni 9)

Joseph Smith received such divinely inspired tutorials about government and politics throughout his life, and he learned them well. Judge Daniel H. Wells, at the time a non-LDS justice of the peace in Nauvoo, observed Joseph in the courtroom; he later reminisced, “I have known legal men all my life. Joseph Smith was the best lawyer that I have ever known in all my life.”⁴

Joseph’s wisdom about leadership came partly from practical experience. He sought for and served in public offices throughout his life. He served as mayor of the city of Nauvoo, stood at the head of the Nauvoo Legion, and aspired to the office of the president of the United States in 1844. However, the experience he gained from serving in these public positions was further augmented by the revelations he received.

Insights about Democracy from the Book of Mormon

While translating the Book of Mormon in 1828–29, Joseph learned about the principles upon which democracy was established in ancient America. Specifically, he learned that a thriving democracy that promotes the public welfare is built on certain cardinal virtues:

- Political rulers and ordinary citizens should view each other as equals before the Lord (see Mosiah 27:3; 29:38).

- Wise individuals should be appointed to judge people according to the laws of the land “which are correct”—and according to the laws of God, which are “always just” (Mosiah 29:11–12, 25).
- Judges should be chosen by the voice of the people in open elections (see vv. 25, 39, 41).
- Decisions should be made by majority rule because the majority will generally choose that which is right (see v. 26).
- All citizens should recognize that if the time comes that the majority chooses iniquity, destruction and the judgments of God will visit the land (see v. 27).
- Checks and balances are important. Lower judges’ decisions should be subject to review by higher judges (see v. 28), and higher judges’ decisions should be reviewed by a small number of lower judges who are appointed by the people (see v. 29).
- Each person has a responsibility to participate and bear a part, and each person has a right to vote (see vv. 34, 39).
- Each person must have an equal opportunity for liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but each is responsible for his own sins, crimes, and mistakes (see vv. 32, 38).
- All men are created equal and have the privilege of thinking for themselves. Actions may be judged according to law, but personal beliefs—matters of conscience and convictions of the soul—should not be regulated or taken away by government (see Alma 30:7, 9–11).⁵

Additional Principles of Good Government

From the time the Book of Mormon was published in 1830 until his martyrdom in 1844, Joseph continued to receive

revelations from the Savior. Many of them are now canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants and contain valuable insight about politics, such as these:

- When properly constituted, government is both necessary and good (see D&C 98:4–10; 134:1).
- The establishment of laws to govern in society is necessary and is based upon an eternal principle. Even God has a kingdom in heaven organized and ordered by law.⁶
- Members of the Church are under special obligations to seek out and then uphold those leaders who are “wise,” “good,” and “honest” (D&C 98:10).
- Regardless of what happens in the world, we are to remember that ultimately, God is in control of the affairs of this earth, and he holds men accountable in the final day of judgment for what they do while they hold public offices of trust (see D&C 121:10–15; 58:19–23). “We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society” (D&C 134:1).
- All citizens share in the responsibility to promote all that is good in their respective communities. “It is our duty to concentrate all our influence to make popular that which is sound and good, and unpopular that which is unsound.”⁷
- Power in government can corrupt individuals if no checks and balances are in place. “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion” (D&C 121:39).

Justifications for War

From 1833 to 1838, Latter-day Saints were mercilessly persecuted and driven from the states of Ohio and Missouri. While contemplating what actions to take, the Saints wondered when war with oppressors is justified. How much self-defense would God condone? Are there principles worth defending, even at the cost of one's life? Does God make allowance for the shedding of blood in times of unjust persecution?

In response to these questions, the Lord revealed his "law of war"—or the circumstances under which he would condone armed conflict. The Lord instructed his people to "renounce war and proclaim peace" (D&C 98:16, see also vv. 34–36). The Prophet Joseph learned that there are specific times and circumstances when the Lord would justify war and that these rules of engagement had also been revealed to those living in previous dispensations (see D&C 98:22–32). As revealed in the Book of Mormon, there are causes worth defending (see Alma 43:29–30, 45), and that attitudes and proper motives are critical during times of crisis (see Alma 48:21–23).

During World War II, President David O. McKay summed up those rules of engagement:

There are . . . two conditions which may justify a truly Christian man to enter—mind you, I say *enter*, not *begin*—a war; (1) An attempt to prevent a nation from dominating another or depriving it of its free agency, and (2) Loyalty to country. Possibly there is a third; viz., Defense of a weak nation that is being unjustly crushed by a strong, ruthless one.

Paramount among these reasons, of course, is the defense of man's freedom. An attempt to rob man of his free agency caused dissension even in heaven. . . . To deprive an intelligent human being of his free agency is to commit the crime of the ages. . . .

So fundamental in man's eternal progress is his inherent right to choose, that the Lord would defend it even at the price of war. Without freedom of thought, freedom

of choice, freedom of action within lawful bounds, man cannot progress. The Lord recognized this, and also the fact that it would take man thousands of years to make the earth habitable for self-governing individuals. Throughout the ages advanced souls have yearned for a society in which liberty and justice prevail. Men have sought for it, fought for it, have died for it. Ancient freemen prized it, slaves longed for it, the Magna Charta demanded it, the Constitution of the United States declared it.

A second obligation that impels us to become participants in this world war is loyalty to government. The greatest responsibility of the state is to guard the lives, and to protect the property and rights of its citizens; and if the state is obligated to protect its citizens from lawlessness within its boundaries, it is equally obligated to protect them from lawless encroachments from without—whether the attacking criminals be individuals or nations.⁸

The Book of Mormon similarly provides many insights into war and its proper conduct. As one of the signs of the future coming of Jesus Christ is an increase in “wars and rumors of wars” across the earth, the war chapters in the Book of Mormon help us prepare for the conflicts of our day. Following are a few of those insights:

- Societies must recognize that great wickedness can be caused by a single, very wicked leader (see Alma 46:9; 47:30; 50:35).
- The Lord’s people oppose bloodshed but are willing to go that far, if necessary, to defend themselves. Nephite soldiers stopped shedding the blood of their enemies the moment those enemies stopped fighting (see Alma 48:11–12, 14; 55:19).
- War and confrontation are rarely the best ways to solve a problem (see Alma 48:14–15; 60:11–16, 21–22; 61:12–13).

- Motives in times of war are critically important. The Nephites entered into war only reluctantly (see Alma 43:8–10, 29–30, 45–48; 44:5; 46:12; 54:13, 16, 24).
- War is incompatible with Christ’s teachings yet in a just cause is acceptable and warranted. Liberty, freedom, families, and lands are worth defending (see Alma 43:29–30, 45–47; 44:5; 48:14; 53:20–21).
- Men of God were chosen to lead in times of armed conflict (see Alma 48:11–13, 16–19).
- Armaments are not as critical to success as righteousness and unity (see Alma 44:3–4; 48:15; 50:21–22; 51:16; see also Helaman 4:11–16).
- The righteous prayers of those at home help preserve a nation in time of conflict (see Alma 62:40).
- Even during perilous times, people can experience happiness and prosperity because of their faith, commitment, and spirituality (see Alma 50:23).
- Just as Joseph Smith accurately predicted the causes and circumstances of the Civil War, he was also informed by revelation that the nations will face even greater future wars and entanglements (see D&C 45:26, 69; 87:1–8; 88:79; 130:12–13; see also 1 Nephi 14:15–16). A heightened awareness of these principles will be critical for future political leaders.

The Separation of Church and State

Thomas Jefferson may have proposed the idea of a separation of church and state, but Joseph Smith described how the principle could work in a pluralistic society. In 1835, Latter-day Saint Church leaders were preparing a compilation of revelations for printing as the Doctrine and Covenants. Oliver Cowdery presented to the members of the Church a statement containing “certain principles or items upon law in general &

church governments.”⁹ The congregation unanimously voted to include it in the Doctrine and Covenants. The Prophet Joseph Smith was on a mission to Michigan when this meeting was held, but he later approved the inclusion of the statement in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Now known as section 134,¹⁰ this treatise on the separation of church and state outlines the duties and responsibilities the church and state owe toward one another, and lays out the limits of authority for both in civil society (see D&C 134:1–12). It proclaims that “governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them” (D&C 134:1). It charges members of all faiths to honor, obey, and sustain the laws of the land: “We believe that the commission of crime should be punished according to the nature of the offense . . . [and that] all men should step forward and use their ability in bringing offenders against good laws to punishment” (D&C 134:8).

It further declares that neither the church nor the state should dominate the other, nor should one religion be supported by the government while others are prohibited, and that the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion must never be disregarded: “We do not believe that human law has a right to interfere in prescribing rules of worship to bind the consciences of men, nor dictate forms for public or private devotion; that the civil magistrate should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul” (D&C 134:4).

The statement affirms that all law-abiding citizens are to be treated in a fair and equal manner: “We believe that rulers, states, and governments have a right, and are bound to enact laws for the protection of all citizens in the free exercise of their religious belief; but we do not believe that they have a right in justice to deprive citizens of this privilege, or proscribe them in their opinions, so long as a regard and reverence are shown to

the laws and such religious opinions do not justify sedition nor conspiracy” (D&C 134:7).

For those dealing with issues related to the separation of church and state, it will prove helpful to make a careful study of Joseph Smith’s “declaration of belief regarding governments and laws in general” (see D&C 134, headnote).

The Constitution of the United States

In December 1833, the Savior affirmed in a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith that he had established the Constitution “by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose” (D&C 101:80). He also told the Saints that they were justified in befriending the constitutional laws of the land (see D&C 98:5–10). And in the 1837 dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet pled, “May those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever” (D&C 109:54).

In another revelation, the Savior further declared that this Constitution was given for the “rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles; that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I [God] have given him, that every man may be accountable” for his own actions (D&C 101:77–78).

Shortly thereafter, the governor of Missouri issued an extermination order against the Saints in that state. They were mercilessly murdered and driven from the state by mobs during the winter of 1838–39; the Prophet Joseph and others were unjustly imprisoned in the ironically named Liberty Jail. Despite these unlawful and unconstitutional assaults, the Prophet Joseph later affirmed his faith in the Constitution: “The Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner; it

is to all those who are privileged with the sweets of its liberty, like the cooling shades and refreshing waters of a great rock in a thirsty and weary land. It is like a great tree under whose branches men from every clime can be shielded from the burning rays of the sun. . . . The Constitution of the United States is true.”¹¹

The Prophet was inspired to warn, however, that if such abuse of the law were to continue unchecked, it would lead to the loss of much freedom and liberty. The first known statement of Joseph in this regard was made July 19, 1840: “Even this nation will be on the verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground and when the Constitution is on the brink of ruin this people will be the staff upon which the nation shall lean and they shall bear the Constitution away from the very verge of destruction.”¹²

Eliza R. Snow later recalled: “I heard the Prophet Joseph Smith say, if the people rose and mobbed us and the authorities countenanced it, they would have mobs to their hearts’ content. I heard him say that the time would come when this nation would so far depart from its original purity, its glory and its love of freedom and protection of civil and religious rights, that the constitution of our country would hang as it were by a thread.”¹ As early as 1843, Joseph Smith noted that the Constitution was already under siege: “The different states, and even Congress itself, have passed many laws diametrically contrary to the Constitution of the United States.”¹⁴

Despite the corruption and challenges in our country, modern Presidents of the Church have called the Constitution a “sacred document” and have continued to bear witness of the increasingly important role the divine principles of the Constitution will play for the future of America and for the entire world.¹⁵ During World War II, at the dedicatory prayer for the Idaho Falls Temple in September 1945, President George Albert Smith prayed:

As we look about in the world among the various countries, we find philosophies and forms of government the effect of which is to deprive men of their free agency, but by reason of thy timely warning to us, we know that they are not approved of thee. Since the God of this choice land is Jesus Christ, we know that his philosophy of free agency should prevail here. Thou didst amply demonstrate this great principle to us by raising up wise men for the very purpose of giving us our Constitutional form of government. . . .

There are those, our Heavenly Father, both within and without our borders, who would destroy the constitutional form of government which thou hast so magnanimously given us, and would replace it with a form that would curtail, if not altogether deprive, man of his free agency. We pray thee, therefore, that in all these matters thou wilt help us to conform our lives to thy desires, and that thou wilt sustain us in our resolve so to do. We pray thee that thou wilt inspire good and just men everywhere to be willing to sacrifice for, support, and uphold the Constitution and the government set up under it and thereby preserve for man his agency. . . .

We pray that kings and rulers and the peoples of all nations under heaven may be persuaded of the blessings enjoyed by the people of this land by reason of their freedom under thy guidance and be constrained to adopt similar governmental systems, thus to fulfil the ancient prophecy of Isaiah that “. . . out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”¹⁶

Political Neutrality

Joseph articulated a policy that remains in effect in the Church today—Latter-day Saints have a civic duty to be actively involved in their communities, but the Church remains politically neutral. Said Joseph: “The Lord has not given me a revelation concerning politics. I have not asked Him for one. I am a third party, and stand independent and alone. I desire to see all parties protected in their rights.”¹⁷

Although Church members are encouraged to be actively engaged in politics and social causes, the Church does not dictate political affiliation, as stated on its Web site:

The Church's mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, not to elect politicians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is neutral in matters of party politics. This applies in all of the many nations in which it is established. The Church does not:

- Endorse, promote or oppose political parties, candidates, or platforms.
- Allow its church buildings, membership lists, or other resources to be used for partisan political purposes.
- Attempt to direct its members as to which candidate or party they should give their votes to (This policy applies to whether or not a candidate for office is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).
- Attempt to direct or dictate to a government leader.

The Church does:

- Encourage its members to play a role as responsible citizens in their communities, including becoming informed about issues and voting in elections.
- Expect its members to engage in the political process in an informed and civil manner, respecting the fact that members of the Church come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and may have differences of opinion in partisan political matters.
- Request candidates for office not to imply that their candidacy or platforms are endorsed by the Church.
- Reserve the right as an institution to address, in a nonpartisan way, issues that it believes have significant community or moral consequences or that directly affect the interests of the Church.¹⁸

Politically Active

Joseph and his brother Hyrum were not idle observers of the political landscape. They both held offices of public trust. Joseph organized several cities. He designed and planned the city of Zion (at Independence, Missouri, yet to be built), and at Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman. Over five hundred modern cities throughout the Intermountain West have been patterned after Joseph's plat for the city of Zion. In 1996 the American Institute of Certified Planners recognized the genius of Joseph Smith's city design and gave him a posthumous award for his "commitment to the building of well-planned and culturally nurturing cities."¹⁹

Joseph planned and founded the city of Nauvoo, the largest city in Illinois at the time. He secured a city charter for Nauvoo from the Illinois legislature (which Abraham Lincoln voted for, as a member of that body), served on the first Nauvoo city council (February 1841), and was appointed as the city's second mayor (1842). Mary Frost Adams noted Joseph's compassion for the citizens of Nauvoo:

While [Joseph was] acting as mayor of the city, a colored man named Anthony was arrested for selling liquor on Sunday, contrary to law. He pleaded that the reason he had done so was that he might raise the money to purchase the freedom of a dear child held as a slave in a Southern State. . . . Joseph said, 'I am sorry, Anthony, but the law must be observed, and we will have to impose a fine.' The next day Brother Joseph presented Anthony with a fine horse, directing him to sell it, and use the money obtained for the purchase of the child.²⁰

The Nauvoo City Council on which Joseph and Hyrum served passed an ordinance guaranteeing religious liberty and free assembly: "Be it ordained . . . that the Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Latter-day Saints, Quakers, Episcopal, Universalists, Unitarians, Mohammedans, and all

other religious sects and denominations whatever, shall have free toleration, and equal privileges, in this city.”²¹

When they drafted the Nauvoo city charter, Joseph commented, “I concocted it for the salvation of the church, and on principles so broad that every honest man might dwell secure under its protecting influence, without distinction of sect or party.”²²

Rudger Clawson observed of Joseph Smith’s leadership: “He had the spirit and courage of a great leader. He was a leader as a military man, as a temporal man, and as a spiritual man. He was broad and liberal in his views; and if he had not been disturbed and interrupted in his plans, Nauvoo would have been one of the most glorious cities ever founded in this country.”²³

Joseph also served as the lieutenant-general of the Nauvoo Legion, a standing army in Nauvoo second in authority only to the U.S. military. He received this honor by the vote of the people and through a commission by the governor of Illinois. Earlier, Joseph led Zion’s Camp, a military march from Ohio to Missouri. The organization he implemented during this march was used for the exodus of all the Saints to Utah many years later.

In 1844, Joseph announced his candidacy for the office of president of the United States. As candidate, he frequently spoke about women’s rights, the liberation of slaves, prison reform, the need for a national banking system, and territorial expansion.

Joseph’s brother Hyrum was also very involved in public life. He served two terms on the Nauvoo City Council. He served as vice-mayor of Nauvoo. He was a candidate for the Illinois state legislature when Joseph was running for president. He was active in the leadership of both the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge and the Nauvoo Legion. And in the last general conference he attended before his tragic murder at Carthage, immediately before the Saints unanimously sustained Joseph as a presidential candidate, Hyrum shared his strong views

about politics and offered firm counsel about the importance of participating in elections:

You are to vote for good men, and if you do not do this it is a sin: to vote for wicked men, it would be a sin. . . . Men of false principles have preyed upon us like wolves upon helpless lambs. . . . Let every man use his liberties according to the Constitution. . . . We want a President of the U.S., not a party President, but a President of the whole people; for a party President disenfranchises the opposite party. Have a President who will maintain every man in his rights. . . .

I despise the principle that divides the nation into party and faction. . . . Damn the system of splitting up the nation into opposite belligerent parties. Whatever are the rights of men guaranteed by the Constitution of these United States, let them have them. Then, if we were all in union, no one dare attempt to put a warlike foot on our soil. I don't like to see the rights of Americans trampled down.²⁴

Political Will and the Courage to Speak Out

After presenting to U.S. President Martin Van Buren hundreds of redress petitions from the Latter-day Saints who had been driven from their homes and lost all their property in Missouri in the 1830s, the Prophet Joseph Smith began to speak out regarding the lack of moral conviction among the politicians of his day: "On my way home I did not fail to proclaim the iniquity and insolence of Martin Van Buren, toward myself and an injured people, which will have its effect upon the public mind; and may he never be elected again to any office of trust or power, by which he may abuse the innocent and let the guilty go free."²⁵

Of the government officials he met, Joseph wrote in his journal:

I arrived safely at Nauvoo, after a wearisome journey, through alternate snow and mud, having witnessed many

vexatious movements in government officers, whose sole object should be the peace and prosperity and happiness of the whole people; but instead of this, I discovered that popular clamor and personal aggrandizement were the ruling principles of those in authority; and my heart faints within me when I see, by the visions of the Almighty, the end of this nation, if she continues to disregard the cries and petitions of her virtuous citizens, as she has done, and is now doing.²⁶

Observing the weak-willed politicians in his day strengthened Joseph's resolve to stand up for the rights of all men and women, regardless of their religious affiliation: "If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a 'Mormon,' I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves."²⁷

Joseph noted that states' rights were so much stronger than the national government in his day that the Constitution was unable to enforce some of its ideals. He said:

I am the greatest advocate of the Constitution. . . . The only fault I find with the Constitution is, it is not broad enough to cover the whole ground.

Although it provides that all men shall enjoy religious freedom, yet it does not provide the manner by which that freedom can be preserved, nor for the punishment of Government officers who refuse to protect the people in their religious rights, punish those mobs, states, or communities who interfere with the rights of the people on account of their religion. Its sentiments are good, but it provides no means of enforcing them.²⁸

Joseph boldly declared that he would never allow any minority group to be abused as the Mormons had been: “It is one of the first principles of my life, and one that I have cultivated from my childhood, having been taught it by my father, to allow every one the liberty of conscience. . . . In my feelings I am always ready to die for the protection of the weak and oppressed in their just rights.”²⁹

The loss of specific freedoms and rights is still an important issue in our day. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has observed that the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of religion, expression, and assembly are in peril:

In this graduation season, many high-school administrators will be deciding whether to include prayer in their ceremonies. The issue is more and more a subject of debate. The new discussion reflects a growing pattern of hostility to religion in the U.S.

In short, many understand the law today as being hostile rather than neutral toward religion—as forbidding all public prayers rather than simply prohibiting state-authored and state-required prayers in public schools. . . .

Religion should have a place in the public life of our nation. To honor this principle with prayers in the graduation exercises of high-school students is to honor the religious plurality of our nation and the religious liberty it was founded to protect.³⁰

1844 Run for the Presidency

National politics were especially troubling to the Prophet Joseph. He was dismayed that the federal government seemed powerless to stop the injustices the Saints had suffered on the state and local levels. So, early in 1844, Joseph Smith sent letters to the five most prominent candidates being considered for the office of president of the United States (Martin Van Buren, John C. Calhoun, Lewis Cass, Richard M. Johnson, and Henry Clay). He desired to know their stands on major

issues of interest to the Mormons, such as slavery, as well as the power of the federal government to secure justice for citizens when local and state governments degenerate into mobocracy. He received replies from three of the five (Calhoun, Clay, and Cass), but none were satisfactory. Cass simply stated in his letter that he had no intention of running.

On January 29, 1844, an informal political caucus was held in the mayor's office in Nauvoo where Willard Richards moved that an independent ticket be created, that Joseph Smith be nominated as candidate for president, "and that we use all honorable means in our power to secure his election."³¹ On January 31, Joseph accepted the nomination. The new party was called the "Reformed Party," and a platform was written by Joseph Smith, William W. Phelps, and possibly John M. Bernhisel. The party's platform was titled *Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States*,³² and in February 1844 it was mailed to President John Tyler, members of his cabinet, Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, and prominent newspaper editors.³³

Two months later, at the April 9 general conference of the Church, Heber C. Kimball called for volunteers to launch Joseph Smith's campaign and 244 people were appointed as "electioneers."³⁴

On May 17, at a convention held in Nauvoo, Joseph was officially nominated, with Sidney Rigdon as his running mate. Joseph said:

I would not have suffered my name to have been used by my friends on anywise as President of the United States, or candidate for that office, if I and my friends could have had the privilege of enjoying our religious and civil rights as American citizens, even those rights which the Constitution guarantees unto all her citizens alike. But this as a people we have been denied from the beginning. Persecution has rolled upon our heads from time to time, from portions of the United States, like peals of thunder, because of our religion;

and no portion of the Government as yet has stepped forward for our relief. And in view of these things, I feel it to be my right and privilege to obtain what influence and power I can, lawfully, in the United States, for the protection of injured innocence.³⁵

Joseph's political platform was visionary and far-reaching. Several of his proposals have since been adopted. Among his most important were the following:

He reviewed the noble sentiments about the founding of our nation as expressed by Benjamin Franklin, as well as the inaugural addresses of the early U.S. presidents, because the president was leading the country away from the basic concepts of the founders.

He wanted to reduce the size of Congress by two-thirds, with one representative per million people, and also reduce congressional pay and power. "The farmer earns two dollars a day, and he lives honestly," Joseph wrote.³⁶

He proposed a major prison reform. Prisoners would have to work to pay their debts to society. In addition, public-service sentences would be established for lesser crimes and turn penitentiaries into "seminaries of learning." Part of Joseph's prison-reform platform was later adopted when the "debtor's prison" was done away with.

He wanted to abolish slavery by 1850 by selling off public lands and using the money generated to purchase the freedom of all slaves. Slaves would be set free, slave owners would be compensated, and citizens would have land for their families. Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested a nearly identical plan ten years later and was hailed as a great humanitarian for doing so.

He proposed *honor* as the standard for service in the armed forces. He wanted to abolish military courts-martial for desertion (which Abraham Lincoln also favored during the Civil War) but have deserters know their country would never trust them again.

He pushed national and state governments to exercise greater economy. Joseph desired a strong national economy with less taxation and judicious tariffs to protect U.S. interests.

He proposed building a dam at Keokuk, Iowa, to harness power from it. Construction on a dam at Keokuk began in 1910 and, when completed in 1913, was the largest electricity-generating plant in the world.

He wanted to create a national bank with branches in each state, and circulate a standard currency. Some aspects of the U.S. Federal Reserve system, established in 1917 (over seventy years after Joseph suggested it), approximate Joseph's proposal.

He wanted to repeal Article IV, Section 4, of the Constitution, which allows governors to request federal intervention to suppress local violence, because governors may be mobbers themselves (as experienced by the Saints in Missouri and Illinois).

He wanted to avoid entangling alliances with foreign powers.

He proposed expanding the United States from coast to coast.

He suggested having a president who is not a party man but president of the United States as a whole and responsive to the wishes of the majority of the people who hold the sovereign power of government.

Of Joseph's *Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government*, Elder John A. Widtsoe said:

This campaign document is an intelligent, comprehensive, forward-looking statement of policies, worthy of a trained statesman. Many of the Prophet's recommendations have been adopted in the progressive passage of the years. All of them are reasonable and sound. . . .

The political utterances and practices of Joseph Smith point to him as a statesman—one from whom the statesmen of the day could win help. Looking back to his day, one cannot help marveling at the breadth of his vision and

how sanely he dealt with the problems of the day. When he touched a matter, whatever its nature, Joseph Smith overtopped the crowd. He has not yet been recognized as he should have been, as a prophet-statesman. Everywhere he is revealed as one who did work beyond the ordinary powers of man. He was led by God.³⁷

On June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith's tragic assassination cut short his bid for the presidency. We are left to wonder what the socioeconomic impact of his ideas may have been had he lived.

Conclusion

Truly the Prophet Joseph Smith offered the world great principles in relation to effective leadership in government, politics, and the public square. The beliefs he espoused can help vouchsafe freedom and liberty for all people for those who have the political will to implement them. We have a Statue of Liberty on the East Coast. Perhaps we should erect a "Statue of Responsibility" on the West Coast to remind us, as Joseph Smith taught, that there is no freedom without responsible citizenship.

In an editorial published by the Prophet Joseph in 1842, he described the difference between the government of God and the governments created by men, and he encouraged us to reach for something higher and more humane:

The government of the Almighty has always been very dissimilar to the governments of men, whether we refer to His religious government, or to the government of nations. The government of God has always tended to promote peace, unity, harmony, strength, and happiness; while that of man has been productive of confusion, disorder, weakness, and misery. . . .

The greatest acts of the mighty men have been to depopulate nations and to overthrow kingdoms; and whilst they have exalted themselves and become glorious, it has been at the expense of the lives of the innocent, the blood

of the oppressed, the moans of the widow, and the tears of the orphan. . . .

The great and wise of ancient days have failed in all their attempts to promote eternal power, peace and happiness. Their nations have crumbled to pieces; their thrones have been cast down in their turn, and their cities, and their mightiest works of art have been annihilated; or their dilapidated towers, or time-worn monuments have left us but feeble traces of their former magnificence and ancient grandeur. They proclaim as with a voice of thunder, those imperishable truths—that man's strength is weakness, his wisdom is folly, his glory is his shame.

Monarchial, aristocratical, and republican governments of their various kinds and grades, have, in their turn, been raised to dignity, and prostrated in the dust. The plans of the greatest politicians, the wisest senators, and most profound statesmen have been exploded; and the proceedings of the greatest chieftains, the bravest generals, and the wisest kings have fallen to the ground. Nation has succeeded nation, and we have inherited nothing but their folly. History records their puerile plans, their short-lived glory, their feeble intellect and their ignoble deeds.

Have we increased in knowledge or intelligence? Where is there a man that can step forth and alter the destiny of nations and promote the happiness of the world? Or where is there a kingdom or nation that can promote the universal happiness of its own subjects, or even their general well-being? Our nation, which possesses greater resources than any other, is rent, from center to circumference, with party strife, political intrigues, and sectional interest; our counselors are panic stricken, our legislators are astonished, and our senators are confounded, our merchants are paralyzed, our tradesmen are disheartened, our mechanics out of employ, our farmers distressed, and our poor crying for bread, our banks are broken, our credit ruined, and our states overwhelmed in debt, yet we are, and have been in peace. . . .

It has been the design of Jehovah, from the commencement of the world, and is His purpose now, to regulate the affairs of the world in His own time, to stand

as a head of the universe, and take the reins of government in His own hand. When that is done, judgment will be administered in righteousness; anarchy and confusion will be destroyed, and “nations will learn war no more.

Other attempts to promote universal peace and happiness in the human family have proved abortive; every effort has failed; every plan and design has fallen to the ground; it needs the wisdom of God, the intelligence of God, and the power of God to accomplish this. The world has had a fair trial for six thousand years; the Lord will try the seventh thousand himself; “He whose right it is, will possess the kingdom, and reign until He has put all things under His feet;” iniquity will hide its hoary head, Satan will be bound, and the works of darkness destroyed; righteousness will be put to the line, and judgment to the plummet, and “he that fears the Lord will alone be exalted in that day.”³⁸

Notes

1. See James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:257; emphasis added.
2. See H. Donl Peterson, “Moroni’s Known Appearances to Joseph Smith, 1823–1829,” cited in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1993), 182–88.
3. Lucy Mack Smith, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 111–12.
4. From a talk given by Jesse N. Smith, a cousin of Joseph Smith, to the Church history class of Professor John Henry Evans in the LDS College, Salt Lake City, April 11, 1905, as recorded in *Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith: The Life Story of a Mormon Pioneer, 1835–1906* (Jesse N. Smith Family Association, 1953), 455–56.
5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 49.
6. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 55.

7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:286.
8. David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 365–66.
9. Kirtland Council Minute Book, 96–106; as cited in Lyndon Cook, *Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 296.
10. This revelation was originally included in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as section 102.
11. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:304.
12. Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Library, Box 1, March 10, 1844; as cited in D. Michael Stewart, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, June 1976, 64–65.
13. Eliza R. Snow, quoted in Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 401; see also Harold B. Lee, *Decisions for Successful Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 209.
14. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 279.
15. “Many latter-day prophets have equated the Constitution to scripture. For example, President George Albert Smith said, ‘The Constitution of the United States of America is just as much from my Heavenly Father as the Ten Commandments’ (in Conference Report, April 1948, 182). President J. Reuben Clark Jr. declared, ‘It is my conviction that God inspired the inditing of that document. Thus the Constitution becomes sacred scripture to me’ (‘Gratitude for Our Heritage,’ Harold B. Lee Library, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, no date, 10–11). And again President Clark said, ‘The Constitution of the United States is to me and to my people as much a part of our religion as the Decalogue . . . or the Beatitudes’ (*Vital Speeches of the Day* 5, no. 6 [January 1, 1939]: 177). President Ezra Taft Benson wrote, ‘I reverence the Constitution of the United States as a sacred document. To me its words are akin to the revelations of God, for God has placed His stamp of approval on the Constitution of this land’ (Ezra Taft Benson, *The Constitution—A Heavenly Banner* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986], 31)” (William O. Nelson, *The Charter of Liberty: The Inspired Origin and Prophetic Destiny of the Constitution* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 9.)
16. George Albert Smith, “Dedicatory Prayer . . . Idaho Falls Temple,” *Improvement Era*, October 1945, 564.
17. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:526.
18. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Political neutrality,” Newsroom, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/public-issues/political-neutrality>.
19. The plaque hangs in Brigham Young Park in downtown Salt Lake City.

20. Mary Frost Adams, "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, December 1906, as quoted in Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 33.
21. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:306.
22. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1957), 2:54.
23. Rudger Clawson, in Conference Report, April 1906, 31.
24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:323.
25. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:89.
26. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:89.
27. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:498; punctuation modernized.
28. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:56–57.
29. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:56–57.
30. Dallin H. Oaks, "When 'Freedom' Becomes Religious Censorship," *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 1990.
31. Smith, *History of the Church*, 188.
32. This platform is reprinted in full in Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:197–209. A brief descriptive summary of the pamphlet can also be found in the LDS Church Education System institute manual, *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 269–70.
33. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:224–26.
34. Smith, *History of the Church*, 325.
35. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:210–11.
36. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:204–5.
37. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith—Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1951), 219.
38. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 248–50, 252.