

June 15, 2021

**“General Joseph Smith and His Candidacy for the Presidency of the United States:
How a Religious Leader Contributed to Strengthening American Democracy”**

International Center for Law and Religion Studies

Elder Dale G. Renlund, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Sister Ruth L. Renlund

Elder Renlund

We are delighted to participate in this Annual Review. We are grateful for the excellent work of all those associated with the Center. Both the quality and the quantity of work that the Center does are impressive.

Sister Renlund

This year’s Annual Review considers religion’s contribution to strengthening American democracy. Our remarks today are more narrowly centered, however, on Joseph Smith and how he, as a religious leader, contributed to strengthening American democracy.

Elder Renlund

We have relied heavily on *The Joseph Smith Papers*, including Volume 14, which is being prepared for publication, and the excellent historical context provided by Church historians. We also thank Brandon Metcalf, an archivist and historian and Manager of Executive Services in the Church History Department, for his editorial assistance and for providing the images we will use.

Sister Renlund

The history surrounding the founding of the United States is simultaneously inspiring and infuriating. From our present perspective, we can see both the promise of the lofty goals and the results of the omissions and compromises that were made in drafting the U.S. Constitution. The freedoms promised to all were not available to all. The liberties claimed for all were not enforced for all. And the security promised to all was not protected for all.

Elder Renlund

Many have experienced these contradictions. Among them are Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and early Church members.

Sister Renlund

Despite the guarantees in the U.S. Constitution of the “free exercise of religion, the right to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances,” the early Saints struggled to practice their religious beliefs without interference. The enumerated rights did not extend to their brand of religion.

Elder Renlund

Time after time, when Joseph Smith called on government officials to enforce enumerated Constitutional rights for him and his fellow Saints, he was turned away. His interest in religious freedom was not theoretical; it was a repeatedly lived experience. He had been directed by Heaven to restore the Church of Christ. Without the rights to freely exercise their religion, to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for redress, Church members were prevented from physically gathering and establishing roots in a geographical location of their choosing due to repeated forced evacuations. Despite these challenges, the membership in the Church continued to increase.

From New York to Ohio and from Missouri to Illinois, persecution and unlawful arrests followed Joseph Smith and other Church leaders. In Missouri, Latter-day Saint adult men met the criteria to participate in the democratic process by voting. But several factors caused contention related to Saints voting in Missouri. Missourians felt threatened by the sheer number of Saints and their ability to control local elections. Another point of conflict was the opposing view on slavery. Anticipating that Latter-day Saint votes would skew toward anti-slavery, their votes were suppressed by pro-slavery Missouri citizens. Their eventual expulsion from that state under the threat of several thousand members of the state militia, left them homeless and friendless. When Joseph petitioned President Martin Van Buren for redress, the President infamously said, “Your cause is just but I can do nothing for you.”

Sister Renlund

Once settled in Illinois, the Saints’ numbers grew to 25,000 and their votes were eagerly sought. Regional and national politics played a significant role in Joseph Smith’s life during the August 1843 election cycle. In preparation for the congressional election, the Whig candidate, Cyrus Walker, and the Democratic candidate, Joseph P. Hoge, spent considerable time electioneering in Nauvoo hoping to secure the Latter-day Saint vote. Because Joseph Smith previously pledged to vote for Walker, one of Joseph’s personal attorneys, most observers believed that Walker would easily win the election.

However, at the public meetings held two days before the election, Hyrum Smith announced that he had received a revelation indicating that the Saints should support Hoge, the Democratic candidate. At a public Sunday worship service held the next day, Joseph delivered a discourse in which he affirmed his personal pledge to vote for Walker but did not raise objections to Hyrum Smith’s revelation for the Saints. Joseph stated that he had never known Hyrum to lie.

Nauvoo residents overwhelmingly voted for Hoge, who carried the election in Illinois’s sixth congressional district. The Whigs blamed the Church for the loss and the Democrats did not appreciate Joseph’s support of the Whig candidate. Joseph and the Church were bereft of political friends and opponents took advantage of this situation.

A few months later, Joseph wrote to the five candidates for President of the United States asking what they would do to help the Saints redress the legal wrongs they had suffered. Two did not respond. The other three said they would do nothing. With frustration mounting, leaders of the Church met and encouraged Joseph to run for the United States’ presidency. On the 29th of January 1844, Joseph announced his candidacy for that year’s presidential election. His

campaign was part of a larger effort to pursue legal avenues that might result in the protection of the Church and its members.

Elder Renlund

That being said, Joseph was not anxious to enter the political arena, declaring in a letter to the editor of the *Wasp*, a weekly Nauvoo newspaper, after his announcement that his “feelings revolt at the idea of having anything to do with politics.” He stated that he wished “to be let alone, that [he] may attend strictly to the spiritual welfare of the Church.”¹

Nonetheless, with the help of W.W. Phelps, Joseph Smith composed a 12-page pamphlet entitled, “General Smith’s Views of the Power and Policy of the Government of the United States.” As was the custom of the day, the pamphlet began with a brief history of the United States that focused on the administrations of the country’s first ten presidents. It included excerpts from the inaugural, annual, and farewell addresses of most of the presidents.

The statements selected were, of course, those that Joseph agreed with. We get a sense of his political philosophy by the portions of prior presidents’ addresses included in his own “address to the people.”

For example, the pamphlet contains this statement regarding George Washington:

“And one of the noble fathers of our freedom and country’s glory: great in war, great in peace, great in the estimation of the world, and great in the hearts of his countrymen, the illustrious Washington, said in his first inaugural address to Congress: ‘...the foundations of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality: and the pre-eminence of free government be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens, and command the respect of the world.’”²

Sister Renlund

In equally laudable language, the pamphlet celebrated the terms of the first seven presidents—up through Andrew Jackson—but Joseph Smith had scathing things to say when it came to Martin Van Buren.³ Joseph claimed that the election of Van Buren was the precise moment when the nation began to decline. Joseph had been a vocal critic of Van Buren since meeting with him in Washington D.C. in 1839. During their meeting, Van Buren refused to assist the Latter-day Saints in their efforts to obtain redress and reparations from the federal government for their expulsion from Missouri. Not surprisingly, the pamphlet depicted Van Buren as unconcerned with maintaining the constitutional rights of the American people.

A sample from that section of the pamphlet illustrates how Joseph really felt about President Van Buren:

“At the age, then, of sixty years our blooming Republic began to decline under the withering touch of Martin Van Buren! Disappointed ambition; thirst for power, pride, corruption, party spirit, faction, patronage, perquisites, fame, tangled alliances; priest-craft and spiritual wickedness in high places struck hands, and revelled in midnight splendor.”⁴

That says it all.

The remainder of the pamphlet consists of Joseph’s political platform framed as a plan to improve the government of the United States and the lives of its citizens. It included several proposals for reform, including constitutional, economic, and social measures. Specifically mentioned are minority rights, a national bank, the criminal justice system, the abolition of slavery, and territorial expansion.

Elder Renlund

Joseph believed that the Constitution was flawed because it did not compel the executive or legislative branches to use federal power to defend minority rights. He proposed that the president of the United States be constitutionally allowed to dispatch the army to suppress mobs in individual states without first receiving a request from a state’s governor to do so.

A sample from the section of the pamphlet on Constitutional reform reads:

“Give every man his constitutional freedom, and the president full power to send an army to suppress mobs; and the states authority to repeal and impugn that relic of folly, which makes it necessary for the governor of a state to make the demand of the president for troops, in case of invasion or rebellion the governor himself may be the mobber and, instead of being punished, as he should for murder and treason, he may destroy the very lives, rights, and property he should protect.”⁵

Now, why do you think this was Joseph’s proposal for Constitutional reform?

Sister Renlund

Well, surely one of the reasons is that this proposal would remove any real or perceived barriers to enforcing minority rights that were threatened by mobs, state militia or government officials. The lack of such a provision in the constitution is the reason that Van Buren gave for being unable to help the Saints.

Elder Renlund

Joseph’s proposals for economic reform centered on banking. He called for the establishment of a national bank with branches in every state and territory and officers who would be elected by the American people and paid a modest per diem for their service. He stated that such a network of banks would ensure a dependable national currency and would ease financial difficulties caused by irregularities and frequent shortages of currency throughout the country.

A sample from that section of the pamphlet reads:

“For the accommodation of the people in every state and territory, let Congress shew their wisdom by granting a national bank, with branches in each state and territory, where the capital stock shall be held by the nation for the mother bank...., And the bills shall be par throughout the nation, which will mercifully cure that fatal disorder known in cities as *brokerage*; and leave the people’s money in their own pockets.”⁶

Why do you think Joseph proposed banking changes as economic reform?

Sister Renlund

Well, the Saints suffered terrible losses in the banking collapse in the 1830s. The Kirtland Safety Society Bank was caught up in the collapse when hundreds of banks failed. Allegations of corruption in the banks that served only the interests of wealthy speculators, added to the urgency for reform.

The third plank of Joseph's platform called for social reform and an overhaul of the criminal justice system in the United States. He called for a drastic decrease in the number of men and women incarcerated in prisons and penitentiaries. This suggests that Joseph viewed the system that sentenced men and women to prison as flawed and as administering justice unevenly based on the economic status of the accused.

A sample from that section of the pamphlet reads:

“Petition your state legislatures to pardon every convict in their several penitentiaries: blessing them as they go, and saying to them in the name of the Lord, *go thy way and sin no more*. Advise your legislators when they make laws for larceny, burglary or any felony, to make the penalty applicable to work upon roads, public works, or any place where the culprit can be taught more wisdom and virtue; and become more enlightened. Rigor and seclusion will never do as much to reform the propensities of man, as reason and friendship. Murder only can claim confinement or death. Let the penitentiaries be turned into seminaries of learning, where intelligence, like the angels of heaven, would banish such fragments of barbarism: Imprisonment for debt is a meaner practice than the savage tolerates with all his ferocity.”⁷

Why do you think prison reform was on Joseph's political agenda?

Elder Renlund

I think his own experience of being arrested and jailed on various occasions must have given him a clear view of the unfairness inherent in the prison system. Joseph advocated for treating people with dignity, and sincerely believed people were capable of learning and changing. He had little economic status in life and his imprisonments deepened his compassion for others in his situation. He had sympathy, too, for those arrested according to the debtor laws of the day. His father was once arrested for a \$14 debt, which today is about \$400. His writing suggests that he believed that the United States could and should be better.

The last major piece of Joseph's platform called for the end of slavery. The issue of slavery created a sharp divide in the United States both politically and economically. This issue permeated the discussion around the admission of additional states into the union and territorial expansion.

Joseph was clear where he stood on the issue:

“Break off the shackles from the poor black man and hire him to labor like other human beings; for an hour of virtuous liberty on earth, is worth an eternity of bondage!... Restore freedom! Break down slavery!”⁸

Joseph’s call for the emancipation of all American slaves would be paid for from the sale of public lands by the federal government and by cutting the salaries of Congress.

Why would Joseph address the contentious issue of slavery as a presidential candidate?

Sister Renlund

In many ways, slavery was the issue of the day, but for Joseph, it was also a matter of right versus wrong. He understood from restored doctrine that all the human family are God’s spirit children. He believed in the dignity and equal rights of all humankind and he was in sympathy with them for their rights were trampled upon, just as his had been.

The pamphlet concludes with Joseph’s philosophy of good government and promises he makes as a potential president. The following is an excerpt from Joseph Smith’s “closing argument” to the people:

“In the United States the people are the government and their united voice is the only sovereign that should rule; the only power that should be obeyed; ...

Wherefore, were I the president of the United States, by the voice of a virtuous people, I would honor the old paths of the venerated fathers of freedom: I would walk in the tracks of the illustrious patriots,...

and when the people petitioned to abolish slavery in the slave states, I would use all honorable means to have their prayers granted; and give liberty to the captive...

let us be one great family; and let there be universal peace.”⁹

The pamphlet is signed,

“With the highest esteem, I am a friend of virtue, and of all the people. Joseph Smith.”¹⁰

Elder Renlund

After the pamphlet was approved, Joseph arranged for Apostle John Taylor to print fifteen hundred copies in the Church’s printshop in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith mailed copies of the pamphlet to President John Tyler and the members of his cabinet, the nine justices of the Supreme Court, several senators and representatives in the United States Congress, the governor of each state, the editors of prominent newspapers throughout the country, and others. In total, he mailed approximately two hundred copies of the pamphlet. The remaining copies sold out a few months later and a new edition was printed. The Church sent out hundreds of electioneering missionaries, who carried the pamphlets with them throughout the country.

“General Smith’s Views” was well received in Nauvoo and by church members throughout the country. *The Prophet*, a Latter-day Saint newspaper published in New York City not surprisingly endorsed General Joseph Smith for President and Sidney Rigdon his running mate for vice president.

Responses from outside the church were often negative. Hounded by mobs throughout the campaign, Joseph was ultimately killed by one while under state government protection, the first presidential candidate to be assassinated. John Tyler was re-elected president in late 1844.

Joseph’s campaign was cut short due to his death. His campaign was intended to muster sympathy for the Church’s cause and give the Saints an agreeable candidate in the election.

Despite the abbreviated campaign, what contribution did Joseph make to strengthening American democracy?

Sister Renlund

Joseph’s assassination demonstrated the point of his campaign, that democratic rights for people to practice their religion had been completely ignored, and it cost him his life. Underlying Joseph’s thinking on democracy in the United States was his firmly held belief that constitutional rights, freedom of religion, and universal freedom should be available to all, including those in minority groups. His very approach to democracy is one that is still being debated and examined today.

Joseph viewed democratic rights through the lens of religious freedom. It was not that democratic rights emanated from religious freedom, rather that the abrogation of religious freedom was a marker for undemocratic government. He spoke and wrote on the subject repeatedly.

Elder Renlund

While a candidate for the U.S presidency, Joseph addressed the Council of Fifty, a group of Church and community leaders, in a meeting on April 11, 1844. Arguing that the agency God gave His children requires mortals also to grant and safeguard the freedom of religion, Joseph Smith declared:

“Nothing can reclaim the human mind from its ignorance, bigotry, superstition, [and so forth] but those grand and sublime principles of **equal rights and universal freedom to all men**... Hence in all governments or political transactions a man’s religious opinions should never be called in question. A man should be judged by the law independent of religious prejudice.” (emphasis added)¹¹

Sister Renlund

Joseph was unique in his day for his insistence that not only should the Latter-day Saints’ religious rights be protected, but that this protection should be extended to all. His position was not manufactured for his presidential run, but a long-held belief.

In 1841, before his candidacy for president, Joseph wrote:

“Now if they had been ... Pagans; or in fine sir, if their religion was as false as hell, what right would men have to drive them from their homes, and their country, or to exterminate them, so long as their religion did not interfere with the civil rights of men, according to the laws of our country? None at all.”¹²

Elder Renlund

The city of Nauvoo was founded on the principle of religious tolerance and freedom. The Nauvoo Charter provided:

“Be it ordained by the City Council of the City of Nauvoo, That the Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Latter-Day-Saints, Quakers, Episcopalians Universalists, Unitarians, [Muslims], and all other religious sects and denominations whatever, shall have free toleration and equal Privileges in this City, and should any person be guilty of ridiculing abusing, or otherwise depreciating another in consequence of his religion or of disturbing, or interrupting any religious meeting, within the Limits of this City, he shall on conviction thereof, before the Mayor or Municipal Court be considered a disturber of the public peace, and fined in any Sum not exceeding five hundred Dollars, or imprisoned not exceeding six months, or both at the discretion of said Mayor, or Court.”¹³

Sister Renlund

Joseph repeatedly reminded politicians that the promise of the Constitution required action to ensure religious freedom for the citizens it governs. He did what we are encouraged to do today to protect our democratic rights: participate, write to elected leaders, run for office, and speak up, among other things. Our history as a nation demonstrates that unless citizens demand that government protect democratic rights, these rights can be ignored or unequally applied, especially for minorities.

I find it so interesting that the reforms Joseph advocated were so forward thinking. His proposal for banking reform was essentially enacted twenty years later. Regarding penal reform, as late as 1983, the Supreme Court had to affirm that incarcerating indigent debtors was unconstitutional, and they used the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection clause for their analysis. That was an amendment to the Constitution that had not even been considered in Joseph’s day. Further criminal justice reform remains pertinent today and is the topic of great discussion. Slavery was abolished twenty years after Joseph’s campaign, plus it took a civil war for that to be ended. As a country, we are still debating how we achieve the promises of the United States Constitution for all.

Elder Renlund

Joseph supported the participation in the democratic process of those who might vote contrary to what even he would have wanted. He took a principled stand, anyone who qualifies, under law, to participate should be encouraged to do so, especially minorities, religious or other.

He wanted the democratic process to work for everyone! Then as now, Latter-day Saints wanted American democratic rights promised in the Constitution to be more than a myth. As a leading evangelical theologian recently stated, the Latter-day Saints in the United States “just want a place at the American table.”¹⁴ Joseph’s run for the American presidency and his subsequent death highlights the need for the vigorous protection of democratic rights in the nation.

Sister Renlund

I am so grateful for Joseph Smith for his prophetic role in restoring the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth. And I have a new appreciation for him as a champion of religious rights and democratic principles. His efforts on behalf of the Saints are inspiring! I am grateful for the rich legacy in this Church of promoting democratic freedom for all.

Elder Renlund

Joseph Smith did everything he could to establish the Restored Church to the earth. This included him taking up the position of trying to fix the things that seemed broken to him. He was indeed God’s prophet on the earth at the time and he led the Church, did the best he could and I’m so grateful for the witness that I have that he was called of God by prophecy, that he saw what he said he saw that day in 1820, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. They commissioned him to restore this Church to the earth. I’m grateful for him and for the legacy that he has brought, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 13, August-December 1843 2021, page 20 of review copy 2/1/2021.

² Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 117 of review copy 2/1/2021.

³ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 121 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁴ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 121-2 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁵ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 125 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁶ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 124-5 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁷ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 123 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁸ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 124 of review copy 2/1/2021.

⁹ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 127-8 of review copy 2/1/2021.

¹⁰ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 128 of review copy 2/1/2021.

¹¹ Joseph Smith Papers Volume 14, 1 January-15 May 1844, page 309-10 of review copy 2/1/2021.

¹² Joseph Smith Papers, Letter to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839, page 53.

¹³ Joseph Smith Papers History, 1838-1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838-31 July 1842], page 1169.

¹⁴ Richard Mouw, quoted in “Lexington: In praise of the Mormon right.” *The Economist*, May 1, 2021, page 24.