Carthage Conspiracy Reconsidered: A Second Look at the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith
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On 27 June 1844, at around four o'clock in the afternoon, a mob of some two hundred militiamen stormed the jailhouse at Carthage, Illinois and shot and killed the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. One might want to explore certain new aspects of the murders. First, one can consider some parallels between the attitude toward Mormons among many non-Mormons in Hancock County in 1844 and that of the Southerners in 1860 toward the Republicans; this will justify the use of the pre-emptive counter revolution thesis employed by James McPherson in his Battle Cry of Freedom.1 One might then identify a point of consensus that bound together a somewhat diverse group of anti-Mormons from Warsaw and Carthage. This will be followed by an identification of the ideological issues that divided Mormons and non-Mormons and then an account of the events leading up to the murder. Finally, one might treat some of the individual fears and grievances expressed by those accused of the murders, and consider why so many downstate Illinoisans, Missourians, and Iowans became involved.

When in June 1844 Thomas C. Sharp reacted to the destruction by Mormon militia of the press of the Nauvoo Expositor, the publication of a splinter group in the Mormon city, one can almost feel his hysteria as he exclaimed, "war and extermination is inevitable. Citizens ARISE ONE AND ALL."2 And after the sheriff of Carthage returned from Nauvoo without having Joseph Smith in custody, since the prophet had again employed a city veto to nullify a legal process of the state, Samuel O. Williams said, "such an excitement I have never witnessed in my life," as hundreds of armed and outraged militia had already poured into Carthage ready to march on Nauvoo.3

Similarly, with an impending takeover of the government in Washington
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by the hated Republican Party in 1860, a Mississippian is quoted by McPherson saying, "the minds of the people are aroused to a pitch of excitement unparalleled in the history of our country."4 And Judah P. Benjamin, a Confederate leader, said no one is "able to stem the wild torrent of passion which ... [has] carried everything before it ... it is a revolution ... of the most intense character."5 McPherson termed this reaction "mass hysteria."6

One can find examples of ad horrendum thinking by the old citizens in Hancock County as they contemplated a Mormon political majority. Thomas Gregg said in 1843 that "the pretended prophet" would "by vile and blasphemous lies" remove "all those moral and religious institutions which have been established by men, as the only means of maintaining those social blessings which are so indispensably necessary for our happiness."7

And Jefferson Davis was in a similar mood in 1860, saying that submission to Black Republicans would mean the "loss of liberty, property, home, country-everything that makes life worth living."8

As McPherson has argued, the South staged a "pre-emptive counterrevolution" to thwart a "revolution" they feared was impending after the Republican presidential victory in 1860, primarily, it seems to me, because the Republicans were opposed to the expansion of slavery into the federal territories, and also because the Southerners believed the Republican party was dominated by abolitionists. McPherson explains that, "rather than trying to restore an old order, a pre-emptive counterrevolution strikes first to try and protect the status quo." "The South," he says, "exaggerated the Republican threat to slavery] and urged pre-emptive action [secession] to forestall dangers they conjured up."9 Just so in Hancock County in 1844, as the anti-Mormons feared what the Mormons might do if they gained political control of the county. The anti-Mormons wanted to maintain the status quo, with the "old citizens," as they called themselves, in political control. This concern was a consensus point which bound together not only anti-Mormons in Hancock County but many down state as well. Thomas Sharp expressed his fears in the Warsaw Signal as early as June 1841. Should the Mormons assume political control of Hancock County, he asked,

Are you prepared to see one man control your affairs? Are you prepared to see the important offices of sheriff and County Commissioner selected by an unparalleled knave, and thus have power to select jurymen who are to sit and try your rights of life, liberty and property? If it comes to this, that Joseph Smith is in control of our county, are we not in effect, the subjects of a despot?10

The point was reemphasized later in July 1844 by S. A. Bartlett,
editor of the Quincy Whig. He said that, despite the death of the
prophet, who was killed on 27 June, the Mormon threat remains. He said
that the "old settlers" were the "first to come and make improvements,
no doubt they have prior rights to the soil." Either the old citizens
must go or the Mormons must. Should the former flee the county, the
Mormons would still cause trouble in the state, with their peculiar
institutions and their "peculiar notions regarding their rights and
privileges." With the exodus of the old citizens the Mormons would
"take over the county."

The old citizens did not secede from Hancock County as a result of the
Mormon threat (although some entertained the idea), but a considerable
number of them participated in a conspiracy to murder Joseph Smith in
a pre-emptive strike to prevent Mormon domination they feared would
bring revolutionary changes to the county and perhaps to western
Illinois.

But how did these old citizens in Hancock County come to think they
were in such mortal danger? To answer that one must first ask what did
these opposing peoples believe they were doing, and how did their
divergent purposes give rise to distrust and conflict? It will be
necessary to review the sequence of events to see how this played out.

The Mormons made no secret of what they were trying to accomplish—to
establish the kingdom of God on earth. Apostle Orson Pratt observed
that the principle difference between the Latter-day Saints and the
followers of William Miller was that the Millerites "believe that the
stone [of the kingdom] is not to strike the image [i.e.
Nebuchadnezzar's image] on his feet till the 2nd advent and a kingdom
will come direct from heaven. We believe God will not destroy the
kingdoms of the earth till he has set [up] his own kingdom." In
other words, the kingdom would be established by the Lord's servants
prior to the second coming. Viewing existing governments from his
millennial perspective, Joseph Smith said he had no confidence in
them, whether monarchial, democratic, or what. They are all doomed to
failure. The Book of Mormon repeatedly affirmed that only a
theocratic government, with a prophet at the head directing a
righteous people could long endure. At Nauvoo Joseph Smith organized
the Council of Fifty in March 1844, intended to be the executive,
legislative, and judicial branch of the kingdom, which he believed
would supersede all man-made governments. In 1845 Brigham Young
announced to the heads of governments of the world that the kingdom
had been set up and that they must give allegiance to it.

In this system of values the ideal Mormon citizen was one who obeyed
the Lord and served Him by giving his all toward building the kingdom
under the inspired leadership of the prophet, Joseph Smith.

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In contrast, as we shall see, the old citizens saw themselves as true "republicans" who believed in the right of every individual to vote freely according to his conscience. They saw Mormon bloc voting as a violation of this principle. They said they were champions of law and order and pledged themselves to uphold the same. They bitterly criticized a consolidation of power in the hands of Joseph Smith, and demanded a separation of powers and separation of church and state. They affirmed their commitment to trial by jury of one's peers. They feared that, if the Mormons gained a political majority in Hancock County, they would control the selection of juries and place Mormons in judgment over the old citizens. They saw themselves as defenders of public morality, charging that Mormon polygamy was "outrageous licentiousness." They insisted that they were devoid of any religious prejudice in their opposition to Mormonism.

To the old citizens of Hancock County, and other counties adjoining, the good citizen was one who upheld these values. As time passed they joined together in supporting Thomas Sharp and his associates in waging war on the Mormons, first of a cold war type, and then of a more violent and combative kind.

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The most divisive issue between the two peoples was political. When the Mormons came to Illinois in 1839 they were Democrats, supporting the party of Andrew Jackson while in Ohio and Missouri. But when the Mormon prophet journeyed to Washington, D.C. after the Mormon expulsion from the latter state, seeking Federal intervention to recover damages for lost property, President Martin Van Buren told Joseph Smith, "I can do nothing for you."18 When the prophet returned to Nauvoo he told his people he would now support the Whig party and the Saints followed his council." Expressing a widely held Mormon feeling, a small group of church members met in August 1840, and declared that "any man who would vote for Van Buren was a knave, a thief, and murderer and robber."20 The Latter-day Saints gave William Henry Harrison, the Whig candidate for President, 410 votes, which gave him a majority in Hancock County.21

Sensing a change in Mormon political attitudes favoring the Whig party, "A Looker On" wrote the editor of the Western World at Warsaw, expressing concern when two deputies from Missouri showed up with an extradition order to return Joseph Smith to that state on an old charge of treason. The writer said he did not think that Smith should give himself up since Mormons would not receive a fair trial "and justice would not be done them."22
These were the exact feelings of Joseph Smith who quickly eluded his pursuers. But fearful that the Missourians would not cease their efforts, the prophet sent John C. Bennett to the state capitol in Springfield to seek a city charter that hopefully would provide authority to offset legal actions initiated by Missourians. Smith said that the idea for his charter was his alone but believed the Democrats, led by Stephen A. Douglas, had much to do with getting the charter passed by the legislature, and in January 1841 he informed his people in a proclamation that they should support the Democrats in the ensuing gubernatorial election.23 S.A. Bartlett of the Quincy Whig now did an about face toward the Mormons and said, "Lieutenant General Joseph Smith has instructed his people to vote [Democratic] in the next election. This is a high handed attempt to usurp power." He warned,

this clannish principle of voting in a mass at the direction of the man who has acquired an influence over the minds of people through a peculiar religious creed ... is so repugnant to the principles of our Republican form of government, that its consequences and future effects will be disagreeable to think of-bitter hatred and unrelenting hostility will spring up.24

This reflects anti-Mormon fears that Mormon ways were in conflict with republican institutions. It raises the question, why did the prophet have his people vote as a bloc from Kirtland to Nauvoo when it was clear from the opposition press that it made enemies? What did it have to do with his ultimate concern, establishing the kingdom? Joseph Smith himself did not say much about a connection. He explained that "the Mormons were driven to union in their elections by persecution, and not by my influence." He said, "the Mormons acted on the most perfect principle of liberty," which was his way of saying he did not force the Saints to vote his way.25 Willard Richards recorded in Smith's journal that the prophet convinced Governor Thomas Ford in January 1842 that the Mormon unit vote "was a necessity."26 A year later when Ford told him to "refrain from all political electioneering," Smith said he had "always acted upon that principle," meaning that he had not actively campaigned for any candidate. But a month after this he told some of his followers, "Tis right, politically, for a man who has influence to use it ... from henceforth I will maintain all the influence I can get."27 The prophet may have thought he had not technically violated what he had implied to the governor for his political influence did not depend on a public display of his preferences.

To some extent Parley P. Pratt helps us to understand why the prophet did not heed Governor Ford's advice that he should stay out of politics. Pratt said that if the Saints would continue to grow in numbers and to vote as a unit they would become "a powerful people"
who would secure a balance of power in the nation "and thus preserve our rights."28

But George Miller, a member of the governing Council of Fifty, said in 1844 that unified Mormon voting would help to usher in the kingdom. Miller said Mormons must "do everything in our power to have Joseph elected President, and if we succeeded in making a majority of converts to our faith and elected Joseph Smith ... in such an event the dominion of the kingdom will be forever established in the United States."29 Making converts was a way of gaining voters who would hopefully elect Joseph Smith president, thus, in a millennial situation, bring about the triumph of the kingdom nationally.

But to return to the events leading to the murders, a scandal erupted in Nauvoo during the summer of 1842 as John C. Bennett was excommunicated for soliciting female favors outside the church's institutional provisions for plural marriage.30 Bennett countered by publishing testimony that the prophet was practicing polygamy.31 This had some impact on the gubernatorial campaign. Disliking polygamy and Mormons who now might vote against his party, the Whig candidate, Joseph Duncan, warned that "Joe Smith, as LIEUTENANT general of the Nauvoo Legion, commanding his followers to vote for this or that candidate, is too bold a stride toward despotism ever to be long countenanced by a free and intelligent people."32 Duncan demanded an immediate repeal of the Nauvoo Charter.33 The Mormon question had thus become a statewide political issue.

Fearing that Duncan's stand against the Mormons might give the Whig candidate an advantage, Thomas Ford, his Democratic opponent, also came out for repeal of the Mormon charter. Ford won the election by a majority of 6,000 votes so that the 1,300 votes the Mormons gave him in Hancock County made no difference, and he felt that he owed them no special favors.34

But before Thomas Ford took office the outgoing Democratic Governor, Carlin, issued an extradition order for the capture of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon charged as accessories in the attempted assassination of Governor Boggs of Missouri, said to be shot by a Mormon, Orrin Porter Rockwell. Smith was arrested in August 1842 but was released from custody by a Nauvoo City Council writ of habeas corpus.35 An informative letter sent to Governor Boggs by deputy Edward Ford on 8 September, reveals how intent the governors of Missouri and Illinois were in seeking the prophet's capture. Edward Ford said he contacted deputies in Iowa to look for the prophet at Montrose while he searched in Nauvoo. He indicated governor Carlin had offered two hundred dollars each for the capture of the Mormons. He observed that if Carlin could get William McDaniel, a crack bounty hunter, to join the search "he will undoubtedly take Smith."36
Unable to secure protection from Missouri writs as a benefit of his Democratic Party leanings, Joseph Smith resorted to what seemed his only recourse, the employment of powers he believed inherent in the Nauvoo Charter. He had the City Council pass an ordinance which would allow them to review and nullify any legal process issued outside Nauvoo that seemed to be malicious or persecuting in nature.37 Thomas Sharp reacted angrily to this provision: "What think you of this barefaced defiance of our laws by the City Council of Nauvoo, and if persisted in what must be the result?" Sharp, thinking so often in horrific terms, predicted that Nauvoo would become a refuge for every criminal along the Mississippi River.38

Governor Carlin, like Sharp, did not approve of the City Council ordinance. He wrote to Emma Smith, the prophet's wife, that he did not believe that the state legislature intended to grant the Mormons under their city charter the right to issue writs to release persons held by authority of the state. Such actions, he said, are a "gross usurpation of power and cannot be tolerated." [39]

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An ominous change in Mormon-non-Mormon relations took place in June 1843 when Joseph Smith and his wife traveled a little over one hundred miles north of Nauvoo to visit her sister at Dixon, Illinois. Here the prophet was taken into custody by two deputies, one from Missouri and one from Carthage, under the old treason charges out of Missouri.'1" The arresting officers were abusive and planned to return Joseph Smith to Missouri. In desperation Joseph sought legal help and contacted Cyrus Walker, an outstanding lawyer and candidate for congress on the Whig ticket. According to Joseph Smith, Walker said he would assist the prophet in exchange for his vote in August. Walker assumed that this guaranteed the Mormon vote and would assure him and his party certain victory. Upon, receiving the prophet's pledge, Walker persuaded the sheriff of Lee County to take Smith and the two deputies into custody and escort them to Nauvoo. Unfortunately, en route a contingent of the Nauvoo Legion joined up with the procession and marched it triumphantly back to the Mormon city, causing a bitter reaction as the word spread among old citizens that the prophet had been set free by force of Mormon arms.41

Following a hearing by a Nauvoo court, the prophet was released, but his mood turned militant when he reflected on his near return to Missouri. He warned, "if Missouri would not cease its persecutions against the Saints ... then I restrain you no longer. I this day turn the key ... from this time forth I will lead you to battle." Joseph urged his followers to not be the aggressor, but when there is no let
up by Missouri "then defend yourselves. God will bear you off." As to Illinois: "will any part of Illinois say we shall not have our rights? Treat them as strangers and not friends & let them go to hell." Joseph concluded by saying that before he would give up his chartered rights "I will do it at the point of Bayonet and sword."42

Smith's warning of a possible Mormon resort to arms was countered by a similar threat from Missouri. A certain J. Hall, who was not identified otherwise, wrote from Independence that "if Illinois by her own authority cannot capture the prophet it will be but a small matter to raise volunteers enough here to raze Nauvoo to the ground." Hall said that he had it on "high authority" in the state that "Missouri will hold the whole state [of Illinois] responsible for the treatment of our messenger and the delivery of the prophet."43

The prophet now decided the Saints should vote Democratic, saying that his promise to Cyrus Walker at Dixon was for his personal vote only. The prophet said that Hyrum Smith, his brother, had received a revelation on the matter, and "I never knew Hyrum to say he ever had a revelation and it failed."44 A Whig editor was furious at this, calling the revelation a "flimsy ruse."45 Once the prophet declared his political intentions, the results were inevitable. Joseph P. Hoge, the Democratic candidate for Congress, gained 2,088 votes in Hancock County while Walker had but 733. The total vote in the sixth congressional district for Hoge was 7,796 to Walker's 7,222, so that the Mormon vote was decisive."46' But Thomas Ford said that, after this election, "the Whigs generally, and part of the Democrats, determined upon driving the Mormons out of the state."47 The Mormons who were elected County Commissioner and Clerk of the County Court, were told by armed citizens at Carthage that they would never be allowed to assume office.48

The old citizens now called for an anti-Mormon convention at Carthage on 19 August but postponed this to 6 September in order to rally additional support. At the meeting, dominated by Whigs, resolutions were adopted that denounced the many dimensions of the Mormon kingdom. They said the prophet "claims to merge all religion, all law and both moral and political justice." The prophet, they said, has shown a "most shameless disregard for all the forms and restraints of law" by having the city council employ its writ of habeas corpus against legal process of the state. The resolution called for armed support from the citizens of Hancock County, and those adjacent counties, and urged Missouri to make another attempt to extradite Joseph Smith, promising to support the Missouri effort. They justified their resort to arms by calling upon their inherent right of self-defense.49

John Harper, a politico who in July 1842 had solicited the prophet's political support for his election to the state's House of
Representatives, said he attended the meeting and no more than a third of its members supported the resolutions. He stressed that the leaders were Whigs who were disappointed that the Mormon vote went against them in the last election.50 Walter Bagby, an opposing politico, disagreed with this assessment, saying that the committee that brought in the resolutions was split between Whigs and Democrats, but he did not deny that the leaders were Whigs.51

Andrew Moore, an old citizen said, "the Mormons have ruled the elections in this county's last election and their [sic] is considerable stir here about it and some strong talk about driving them from the County."52

Upon learning about the meeting at Carthage, and that two Mormons had been taken hostage by armed men from Missouri and Hancock County, the prophet over reacted by placing the Nauvoo Legion on alert, and having the City Council pass another ordinance that, if any person came to Nauvoo with a legal demand based on the old Missouri charges, they might be imprisoned for life.53

Thomas Gregg, editor of the Warsaw Message and heretofore a more moderate voice than that of Thomas Sharp, on 26 December 1843, published an Extra saying there was an "irresponsible and growing power at Nauvoo" and it must be "met rightly." He warned of an approaching crisis in Hancock and adjoining counties.54

When an attempt to arrest a Mormon in Nauvoo was thwarted by a City Council writ, the anti-Mormons retaliated by blocking, by force of arms, a Mormon attempt to arrest an old citizen.55 Taking note of conditions in Hancock County, the editor of the Missouri Republican observed, "it is quite evident that law has lost all its obligations in the county where the Mormons are principally located, and an embittered and hostile feeling is taking possession of both parties."56

Fearful of an impending invasion of Nauvoo, the prophet called upon the citizens of several states to come to the rescue of the Saints. Among these were appeals to Vermont and Pennsylvania, but receiving no affirmative response to his appeals, Smith despaired for the nation.57 He wrote to John C. Calhoun in November 1843, saying if the Saints were not "paid for their [property] losses in Missouri and restored to their rights God will ... vex this nation ... yea the consuming wrath of an offended God shall smoke through the nation."58

Two months later, following strong urging from some of his followers, a somewhat reluctant prophet announced his candidacy for President of the United States, saying, "if they elect him ruler of the nation he would save them and set them at liberty."59 The prophet sent
emissaries throughout the nation to make converts and gain voters. Political conventions were held in several major cities but they could rally little support. The prophet had no base of political offices, (patronage) except possibly in Hancock County, upon which to build a national party and possessed a negative image among many Americans.60

A Whig supporter supposed early in 1844 that the Mormons "are worth coaxing a little," but a more observant party member said later, "our Mormon neighbors can not be relied on ... Joe is a candidate for President, he will not vote for Mr. Clay."61 Thomas Ford said that the prophet's effort to establish his own party brought him into "conflict with the zealots and bigots of all parties, and added that this was the prophet's crowning error," for it turned "all parties against them."62 Thus, the Saints were left without political allies of any kind in Illinois.

An anti-Mormon meeting was held at Warsaw on "Saturday," perhaps in early January, to appoint delegates for a forthcoming anti-Mormon convention of 17 January 1844. At this Warsaw meeting a participant, Mr. Hosford, asked, "what encroachment the Mormons had been guilty of." Sharp countered this, but others reacted by opposing the coming convention, saying it would promote mobocracy. Nonetheless, the convention was held at Carthage on the seventeenth, and resolutions were passed to "resist with undaunted courage Mormon aggressions upon our civil rights." Thomas Sharp commented ominously in his report in the Warsaw Signal that he approved of the determination at the convention to "maintain the laws so long as they are a protection to us." [63]

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When a splinter group of religious dissenters emerged in Nauvoo in early 1844, opposed to polygamy and to the political kingdom, Sharp quickly adopted them into the anti-Mormon camp.64 In April Sharp warned, "let Joe dare to harm one of them and he will awaken a spirit to which resistance will be useless."65 Nevertheless, several of the dissenters were excommunicated, including William Law, a former member of the church presidency who became the leader of the splinter church.66 They announced their intention to publish a newspaper in Nauvoo called the Nauvoo Expositor, and promised to reveal the secrets of the kingdom. According to Francis Higbee, a dissenter, the paper would reveal Smith's style of legislation, his plan for a new government and his practice of polygamy.67

At the end of May, perhaps with encouragement from Sharp and his friends, the dissenters brought two charges to Carthage against Joseph
Smith for adultery and for perjury.68 The prophet made a hurried trip to Carthage for an immediate hearing, but it was postponed.69

Sharp warned Smith in the Warsaw Signal, shortly after the prophet's unsuccessful visit to Carthage, that he had bitter enemies outside Nauvoo and that "we would not be surprised to hear of his death by violent means in a short time." He said the "feeling in the county is now lashed to its utmost pitch, and will break forth in fury upon the slightest provocation."70 Actually, as Sharp admitted later, it was in early June that a meeting was held which passed resolutions "to exterminate the Mormon leaders.71

When the first issue of the Nauvoo Expositor came out, the prophet was greatly alarmed.72 He met with the City Council and argued powerfully that the paper was a nuisance and that it and the press should be destroyed. A segment of the Nauvoo Legion acted on this order and destroyed the issues of the Expositor and smashed the press, casting the type into the Street.73 The dissenters, who already had the ear of Sharp and his friends, protested the destruction of the press and soon, up and down the Mississippi River, a mounting rage was manifest. S. A. Bartlett of the Quincy Whig called the act of the Legion a "most daring outrage" and affirmed that it "really seems to us that their intention is to put the law at defiance." He said Mormons are "unworthy to be trusted with power."74 Three days later the editor of the Lee County Democrat in Iowa, across the river from Nauvoo, said the smashing of the press "has aroused the people of Illinois ... hundreds of them properly armed and equipped, hold themselves in readiness at a moment's notice to go to Nauvoo to aid ... the authorities."75 An influential citizen at LaHarpe expressed the feelings of most Illinoisans, saying the issue is "whether the law should have its corse on Smith or not."76 At Warsaw Thomas Sharp termed the Expositor destruction an "UNPARALLELED OUTRAGE," and summoned the citizens to "carry the war into the enemy camp."77 William Law went to Carthage to charge that Joseph Smith had instigated a riot.78

Sheriff David Bettisworth of Carthage acted on Law's charges, but when he reached Nauvoo on 12 June Smith refused to be taken to Carthage.79

The mob spirit was magnified when Bettisworth came back to Carthage without his prisoner, saying Smith had told him he would be tried by any judge but only in Nauvoo.80 Samuel O. Williams, quoted earlier, was correct in his description of the intensity of the "excitement."81

As the call for armed volunteers went out the response was immediate, so that large numbers now gathered at Carthage.82 A messenger was also sent to Governor Ford asking him to call out the state militia to help capture Smith. If Ford would not comply the old citizens said they
would "form a posse comitatus" and march on Nauvoo. The Mormons "must surrender the prophet or prepare for war."83 The prophet wrote to Governor Ford to justify the action against the Expositor. He offered to submit to an investigation at Springfield, the state capital.84 On 17 June Smith placed Nauvoo under martial law. He assembled the Nauvoo Legion and told them, "I call God and angels to witness that I have unsheathed my sword with a firm and unalterable determination that this people shall have their rights."85

Meanwhile Governor Ford, arriving at Carthage, declared that Smith had broken the law in wrecking the press and not giving the Church dissenters a trial. He objected to unusual searches of houses and the powers Smith had exercised in acting as judge and issuing writs to free himself and others. He said the prophet had assumed too many powers and that he, along with those who were involved in the action against the Expositor, must stand trial at Carthage. Ford said he would call out the state militia if Smith did not surrender himself as ordered.86 The Quincy Whig editor warned of resolutions at Carthage that if Smith did not surrender it would bring on a war of extermination.87

Knowing he had mortal enemies in Carthage, the Mormon prophet pondered his chances. He decided that, to preserve his life, he must flee and head for Iowa. He might have escaped with his life, but some elders accused him of cowardice and warned him that Nauvoo might be sacked if he did not return.88 Smith's attorney, James Woods, arranged for him to surrender to state authorities and he started for Carthage on 24 June, only to be brought back to Nauvoo by captain Dunn under instructions from the governor, to urge the Saints to surrender their arms. Smith told several of the Saints that he would go "like a lamb to the slaughter." He left for Carthage after this and arrived at midnight to be lodged in the Hamilton House. In the morning he was put on parade before the town's militia, the Carthage Greys, bitter enemies who threw their arms to the ground in disgust. A preliminary hearing was held on the perjury charge and the prophet might have gone free. To prevent this he was immediately charged with treason and held over.89

At Carthage Governor Ford, perhaps recognizing his impotence in this volatile situation, decided to proceed to Nauvoo to caution the Saints.90 He placed the Carthage Greys at the jail to protect the prophet. Smith had visitors, one of whom gave him a pistol.91 Ford dismissed the militia that had gathered from afar, but not all were within the sound of his voice. After Ford left for Nauvoo on 27 June, the militia from Green Plains and Warsaw, en route, they assumed, to attack Nauvoo, stopped at the shanties along the Mississippi River where they were addressed by Thomas C. Sharp. The editor told them now was the time to dispose of Smith for Ford had departed Carthage and
would be made to look bad if anything happened to the Mormon leader while he was away. Volunteers from this military body now marched to Carthage and stormed the jail. The Greys, participating in the conspiracy, fired blanks at the mob and stood aside and watched as the militia ascended the stairs and shot through the jail door, killing Hyrum Smith, who had been imprisoned with his brother.92 Joseph Smith fired three shots of his own down the stairway, wounding some, and then fled to the window, opening it then jumping out. Sharp said that, after the fall, he was "dispatched."93 When the body was examined it showed that the prophet had been shot twice in the back and twice in the front. While on the ground he was stabbed with a bayonet.94

But why did men like Thomas C. Sharp, Mark Aldrich, William Grover and Levi Williams, along with Jacob C. Davis-five of the eight men indicted at the trial-who were "some of the most respectable citizens in the county," conspire to murder the Mormon prophet?95 They all shared a fear of Mormon political potential.96 But each had his individual concerns.

Thomas C. Sharp, son of a Methodist minister, had been trained in the law but had no success in his practice due to a hearing impediment. He found that his anti-Mormonism was the best way to sell his newspapers. [97]

While claiming to be a Democrat, his views usually corresponded with those of the Whigs. [98] He said he was free of religious bigotry, although he once described the Mormons as a "power in league with the Prince of darkness." [99]

Furthermore, at the anti-Mormon convention on 17 January, where Sharp was a leading participant, a resolution was passed for the "pious" to have a day of fasting and prayer on 9 March 1844, "that God ... would speedily bring the fake prophet, Joseph Smith, to a deep repentance for his presumptions and blasphemy." [100] The anti-Mormon meetings at Warsaw were held in the church, where ministerial influence was no doubt present. [101]

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Nonetheless, the rights Sharp was defending were largely political as his editorial cited earlier demonstrates, as does his remark in August 1846 when the Mormons were at last driven from the county and state. He said that the old citizens had finally won an election "by a handsome majority," and now we can "more effectively defend our rights and property by legal means."102

The question raised by a delegate named Hosford at the January 1844
convention bears consideration—what had the Mormons done?103 Mormon unit voting did help defeat Walker in a congressional election, but Sharp ignored this. The old citizens in Hancock County considered the prophet and his followers a threat to their political ambitions; but, in fact, when the Mormons did gain a political majority in the county the old citizens found ways to nullify, through intimidation and manipulation, any influence of Mormon office holders. None of the writs issued out of Nauvoo to save the prophet from extradition to Missouri did harm to Sharp and his supporters except that they hoped extradition would rid them of the Mormon leader. Thus, as we have seen, Sharp’s antagonism came essentially from what he feared the Mormons might do if they maintained control of the county politically.104

It does not seem likely that Sharp was hurt by the Mormon withdrawal from Warren, a town south of Warsaw that the Saints and old citizens planned to settle in August 1841 until, according to Willard Richards, the old citizens began charging excessive prices for everything.105

Sharp took note of the plans for Warren, which he renamed "Money Diggerville," and said he hoped the "curse of such a settlement will be spared us," suggesting that he wanted nothing to do with it.106 Sharp saw Nauvoo as a rival to Warsaw since he complained that his town’s inability to secure new investors was the fault of the Mormons, and he may have been the champion of town lot speculators.107

Whatever Thomas Sharp’s most elementary personal motives may have been—whether as political partisan, newspaper huckster, town promoter, land speculator or religious bigot, he was the quintessential anti-Mormon in Hancock County and perhaps in the state. It was his newspaper that initiated and perpetuated the bitter and, in the end, murderous attitudes that led to the outcome at the Carthage jail.

Mark Aldrich was undoubtedly hurt by the Mormon withdrawal from Warren, for he had invested heavily in the project and claimed bankruptcy as a result. He became an anti-Mormon after this, but most businessmen do not murder those who hurt them in a business transaction.108

Levi Williams was a politico, who said the real reason Joseph Smith was killed was that "the Mormons ruled the county, elected who they pleased, and the old citizens had no chance," that it was "the only way they could get rid of them," thus confirming the pre-emptive nature of his response.109 Williams was a colonel in the Warsaw Militia.110 William Grover was a captain in the same military unit, while Aldrich was a major.111 There may have been some jealousy toward "General Joseph Smith" who commanded a larger military unit than any of these men. Jealousy was certainly manifest by the Carthage Greys at
the Hamilton House when Governor Ford paraded the prophet before them, and they protested violently.112 It seems doubtful that the old citizens really feared the Mormon military force, however, since they had no trouble raising a larger one.

The anti-Mormons made much of their republicanism, and the potential threat to the same of the authoritarian establishment at Nauvoo. But if republicanism was so important to the opponents of Mormonism in western Illinois, why did so many of them violate their principles in the way they opposed and murdered the Mormon prophet?

They advocated the right of every individual to vote freely but opposed any Mormon doing so. They assumed, as we have seen, that the Mormon voter was being coerced in some manner, but this was not the case. The individual Mormon voted as the prophet counseled because he shared his leader's ideals of the kingdom.

The old citizens proclaimed themselves champions of law and order, but resorted to violence, not law, in their "summary execution" of Joseph Smith.113 They said the Mormon prophet had placed himself above the law, but when five of them were tried for his murder they placed themselves above the law by packing the courtroom to assure themselves a verdict of acquittal. Sharp admitted that, during the trial, "we were surrounded by friends who made our cause their own and who were ready at all hazards to stand by us in any emergency."114 One of the defense lawyers, Orville Browning, warned the court of the possibility of civil war, saying, "Let a sentence of conviction ... be carried into execution and it ... would be the commencement of a ... bloody and terrible war."115

Again, at their trial, defendants Sharp, William Grover, Mark Aldrich, Levi Williams, and Jacob Davis, protested that the County Commissioner, a Mormon, had chosen a Mormon jury that was prejudicial, thus attempting to forestall what had been one of Thomas Sharp's greatest fears. They persuaded the judge to select "elizers" from the crowd in the courtroom to choose another jury, knowing that there were no Mormons at court for fear of their lives.116 Thus the anti-Mormon leaders sought for themselves what they had strenuously opposed for Joseph Smith, the privilege of being tried exclusively by friends rather than enemies.

If Sharp and company were sincere about upholding public morality and maintaining the law, they might have given Joseph Smith his day in court on one of the two charges.117 But Governor Thomas Ford saw through the pretext of a charge of treason that was used to hold the prophet in Carthage. Ford observed:

The act of treason charged against the Mormons consisted in the
alleged levying of war against the state by declaring martial law in Nauvoo, and ordering out the Legion to resist the posse comitatus. Their actual guilt would depend on circumstances. If their opponents [the anti-Mormons] merely intended to use the process of the law as a cat's paw to compass the possession of their persons for the purpose of murdering them afterwards, as the sequel demonstrates the fact to be, it might well be doubted whether they [the Mormons] were guilty of treason.118

As we have seen in Warsaw and Carthage there were some strong religious feelings involved in the opposition to the Mormons. They proclaimed themselves champions of public morality in opposing Mormon polygamy but revealingly murdered Hyrum Smith at the jail because he was a potential Mormon leader whom they feared might hold the Church together once Joseph was dead.119

Joseph Smith's opponents did not like the way he combined religious, political, and judicial powers at Nauvoo in assuming so many leadership roles. They saw this as a violation of the principle of a separation of powers. Yet when they killed the prophet those involved assumed the roles of judge, jury, and executioner, nonetheless considering themselves public benefactors.

Conveniently, albeit belatedly, in June 1844, the old citizens became champions of freedom of the press after the Nauvoo Legion destroyed the Nauvoo Expositor, but had their plans for sacking the Mormon city been executed, they would have silenced three existing Mormon newspapers, the Times and Seasons, the Nauvoo Neighbor, and the Wasp.

With these contradictions between their avowed principles and their actions, how does it add up to the kind of mass hysteria that prevailed along the Upper Mississippi River in June 1844? One is reminded again of the great fear prevailing in parts of the old South in 1860 when the "Black Republican," Abraham Lincoln, was elected President by a plurality of votes. The South, like the old citizens, feared they might become a permanent minority and that their lives, liberties, and property were endangered. [120] Perhaps in light of the great political changes that Americans were experiencing as the nation moved from being a republic where property rights were revered and rewarded with the franchise, to a democracy where it appeared that men with or without property came to vote and elect Andrew Jackson, it is not surprising that the old South along with the old citizens in Illinois and the Mormons at times had strong objections to democracy, that is, majority rule. [121] The issue of majority rule v. minority rights was one of the most unsettling and difficult
issues of the day, at least as far as white Americans were concerned. [122]

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Joseph Smith feared what the political majority under Governor Boggs or his successor in Missouri might do to him should he be taken to that state, hence his city veto or extradition. Similarly, according to his own explanations, he feared in part what a political majority of Whigs or Democrats in Illinois might do to him or his people without Mormon bloc voting, which he saw as a means of self-defense. The old citizens, meanwhile, looked at the rapid growth of Nauvoo in just four years and feared Mormons would have a ruling majority in the county. Neither the prophet nor Thomas Sharp seemed to realize that they both were confronted with the same perplexing problem-preserving their minority rights in the face of a hostile majority. In the end, with the survival of Nauvoo at stake, the prophet submitted to the will of the majority in Illinois as represented by Governor Ford who demanded his surrender to officials at Carthage in late June 1844. But Thomas Sharp refused to accept majority rule in Hancock County once the numerous Mormons arrived and sought to protect the minority rights of the old citizens by a preemptive counterrevolution that drove the Mormons out of the county and state. In this context his appeal to arms is not too dissimilar from that employed by the South at Fort Sumpter when they believed their vested rights were in dire jeopardy in the democratic United States.

At a time when a temple has been rebuilt in Nauvoo that may very well draw many Mormons back to western Illinois, it may be of some benefit for Saints and citizens of the state to think of the issues between the antagonists of 1840-46 in this new way. If this generation can see that both parties in this pre-Civil War era faced a common problem, then maybe sharing political influence with Mormons can become a way of life in today's Hancock County.

It has been shown how the people of Hancock County reacted when the Latter-day Saints gained a political majority there and seemed ready to dominate. It led directly to the murder of the prophet. But this only involved two hundred Warsaw and Green Plains militia. But many hundreds had come to Carthage from outlying areas a few days before, ready to sack Nauvoo, drive the Mormons out, and kill the prophet. George Rockwell, a militiaman from Warsaw, had to have been aware of the intentions of the downstate militia, for military action against Nauvoo depended upon their participation. Regarding the Saints at Nauvoo, he said, "their lives will be spared (excepting Jose [sic] Smith and a few of his advisers) but the city of Nauvoo will be destroyed.123
By mid-June 1844, at Warsaw, all available males were under arms with others coming from afar. Thomas Sharp, once more disclosing his fierce religious bias, urged his "friends from a distance" to come, saying "you will be doing God and your country service in aiding us to rid the earth of a most Heaven-daring wretch." Sharp reported:

throughout the country every man is ready for conflict. In Clark Co., Missouri, many are holding themselves in readiness ... from Rushville ... 300 men have enlisted for the struggle, McDonough County is all alive and ready. ... From Keosauqua, Iowa ... the citizens are in arms in our behalf. ... From Keokuk and the river towns all are coming.124

But why did so many come from places where politics may not have been as acute an issue as it was in Hancock County? One revealing answer comes from a candid editor of the Missouri Commercial Bulletin. He said Mormon "manners, customs, religion and all, are more obnoxious to our citizens than those of the Indians, and they can never live among us in peace. The rifle will settle the quarrel." He added, "they denominate us as heathens, and say the time will come when their power will spread over the kingdoms of the earth." He objected to "visions, tongues, and how Mormons follow Smith's will."125

But if repugnance toward the Mormon style of religion is one answer, a more universal one lies largely in the needs and influence of a fiercely partisan political press. Robert Remini has shown that one of the major achievements of the Jacksonians during the 1828 campaign was the creation of a pro-Democratic national press in support of Andrew Jackson.126 The Whig party did its best to match this development. Party newspapers sprung up in virtually every small town and city across the land. Largely unsubsidized, the editors of these papers depended upon small operating costs and a loyal readership for survival. These editors were desperate for stories that would sell their newspapers. Thomas Sharp had demonstrated that anti-Mormon stories provided a sure means of selling papers, and downstate editors often followed his lead. As Bernard Weisberger has observed, impartiality was not part of the given format: "In the political world of the day objective reporting was as rare among newspapermen as civil service was among administrators." Nothing good was ever said about the political opposition, with charges often made of conspiracy and subversion.127

It was the prophet's misfortune that his means to millennium was partly political, and that his numerous people's bloc voting habits were seen as subversive. At no time did the partisans of the opposition speak well of Joseph Smith. Thus the editor of the Alton Telegraph, in a town north of St. Louis, warned as early as November 1840 of a potentially potent political influence held by the prophet. He published an excerpt from a newspaper at Alexandria that depicted a
revealing encounter between the prophet and his people. He said that a number of principle men gathered around the prophet at Nauvoo "apparently anxious to hear the words that fell from his lips, his bearing towards them was like one who had authority and the deferences which they paid him convinced us that his dominion was deeply seated in ... their consciences." After hearing the prophet denounce President Martin Van Buren, the visitor commented upon the unusual influence the prophet had on the Saints' political thinking. To this the Mormon leader replied, "yes, I know it, and our influence as far as it goes, we intend to use." The visitor warned that the Mormons are "trained to utter one cry and think and act in crowds, with minds that seem to have been stuck from the sphere of reason." He said, "these sectaries must hold in their hands a fearful balance of power," and predicted that, "should they decide to exert evil they surround our institutions with the element of danger."128

The same editor affirmed on 2 July 1841, that "the people throughout the state have become alarmed at the assumption on the part of the Mormons that their spiritual head 'Joe Smith' is to decide who is elected in the state," thus sharing the Hancock citizen's concern to preserve the initial political status quo.129 He published a charge on 21 July 1842, by Mormon apostate John C. Bennett that Thomas Ford and the editor of the Illinois State Register at Springfield, had joined the prophet in an "infamous bargain." The editor credited the Whig gubernatorial candidate, Joseph Duncan, with exposing the conspiracy, and said, "but for his [Duncan's] moral firmness Joe [sic] Smith would undiscovered still have been perfecting his plot to destroy the State of Illinois and the liberty of her citizens."130 It is difficult to see how if Joseph Smith joined with the Illinois State Register in support of Ford's candidacy this constituted a liberty destroying plot, but the editor tended to think in horrific terms.

But there is another element in the downstate press (and even outside the state as far away as Iowa and Missouri) that is more subtle than partisans politics, but no less influential, and which may have turned political bitterness and hostility into downright hysteria and mob violence. It had to do with what Alexis DeToqueville said about the democratic Americans. He said that they care more for equality than liberty, that equality was their "passion."

"Freedom cannot ... form the distinguishing character of democratic ages. The peculiar and preponderant fact that marks those ages as its own is the equality of condition; the ruling passion of men in those periods is the love of this equality." [131]

For the old citizens in downstate Illinois and adjoining environs the Mormon prophet seemed to have placed
himself, by virtue of his claims to divine inspiration, too far above his fellow Americans.

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In Iowa in 1841 the editor of the Hawk Eye and Iowa Patriot, published at Burlington, Iowa, published a series of articles by a town planner and land speculator, David Kilbourne, charging that the prophet had made inroads on his domain by planning the city of Zarahemla across the river from Nauvoo, on land where the title was unsettled. Kilbourne complained of a "revelation" by the prophet informing the Saints of the new gathering place. Kilbourne said, "Are the people of Iowa prepared to submit to stich treatment from an imposter, as vile as ever disgraced humanity?" 132

On hearing in January 1842 of the prophet's proclamation telling the Saints to vote Democratic, the editor of the Whig newspaper, the Sangamo Journal, was struck at the way that the prophet seemed to exert excessive influence. He said,

So long as MR. SMITH keeps near the sanctuary and prophecies of religion, he is guiltless of offence, but when he enters upon the duties of a civil office of the State, and as lieutenant General speaks to his friends who he KNOWS AS PROPHET he cannot command, and uses the religious influence he possesses under the military garb he has acquired, he becomes a dangerous man, and must look to the consequences.

The editor urged the prophet to give up his military title and stick to religion. He added with foreboding, "we do assure him upon an honest belief, that his situation in Illinois, is far more dangerous than ever it was in Missouri, if he undertakes to take Mohamet's part ... and play the warrior and prophet." He warned the Mormon people of the dangerous precipice to which they had been led and begged them to "shun it." 133

But it was in all likelihood the allegation that the prophet was above the law where all men were said to be equal that infuriated those outside Hancock County, where politics was not so potent an issue. Thus the editor of the Sangamo Journal published a warning by John C. Bennett in August 1842 that the prophet had subversive intentions.

Joe Smith designs to abolish all human laws and establish a theocracy in which the word of God, as spoken by his (Joe's) mouth, shall be the only law; and he now orders that his fellows shall only obey such human laws as they are compelled to do, and declares that the time is at hand, when all human institutions shall be abrogated. 134

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For those who believed Bennett and the Sangamo Journal, this was confirming evidence that the prophet held himself to be above the law of the land.

The editor of the Quincy Herald, a Democrat, published a further warning that the prophet stood above the law. In early 1843 "ALPHA" wrote regarding a release of Joseph Smith by a Whig federal judge, Nathaniel Pope, from the writ out of Missouri that charged Joseph Smith with being an accessory to the murder of Lilburn Boggs. Pope argued that the writ was invalid since the prophet had not fled Missouri to escape the above charge. ALPHA, however, complained that the federal court had no jurisdiction and said that Orville Browning, the U.S. District Attorney, had defended Joseph Smith rather than prosecuting him. He failed to explain how Browning could have prosecuted the case if, as he said, the court had no jurisdiction. In any event, he insisted that corruption was involved in the whole affair. He said, "if the people of one state can by aid of hirelings, assassinate, and attempt to murder those of another state, and there is no law to punish [italics are mine] where is the safety of the citizen?" He asserted that the prophet had succeeded in evading the consequences of his actions under the law and had put it at defiance.135

Convinced that the prophet had placed himself above the law during his lifetime, the editor of the Missouri Republican published a letter from a Carthage citizen who had this to say regarding Smith's fate at the Carthage jail: "the man who acknowledged no law but his own arbitrary will, and was restrained by no power but his own base fears, could lay no just claim to the protection of the law. He was no more entitled to it after his surrender than before."136 With this kind of contorted reasoning, the correspondent had placed Joseph Smith on 27 June not above the law but beyond it, where his only rights, if any, would be the right of self defense. This would imply that the prophet would have been justified in calling out the Nauvoo Legion to protect himself and his people.

Thus it was that the editors down river from Nauvoo, initially partial for the most part to the Whig party, harbored deep seated resentment toward the Mormon prophet for what seemed his lofty titles and extraordinary power, for his excessive political influence with his people and his "infamous bargain" with the Democrats, and especially his immunity from legal process. By the beginning of 1843 the Democrats had joined the Whigs in their hostility toward Joseph Smith. These influential editors had persuaded their subscribers that the prophet was a law-defying menace who would subvert their most vital institutions. Not only must he be disposed of, but his people must be driven out, no longer to be a threat to the state's political and legal processes. Thus Alexis De Tocqueville seems to have been correct.
at least in regard to these Americans, in his assessment that they cared more for equality than liberty. If they had cared for liberty as a principle they might have allowed the prophet and his people more time to see what the direct effects of the kingdom might be, with the possibility that there would have been no disruption of their prevailing institutions.

An alternative would have been to drive the Mormons out at gunpoint without resort to the murders of Joseph and especially Hyrum Smith that stamped the affair as more than a fight for political control, civil rights, or supremacy of the law. [137]

Notes:
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In the 1830s and 1840s, frontier Illinois contained a very volatile mix of people. This new environment facilitated a leveling factor that brought people from all parts of the country and from all walks of life. These people transplanted their beliefs, attitudes, and values into their new surroundings. Not surprisingly, the first structures built in these new Illinois settlements were churches, schools, and meeting places, most times well before the installation of merchants and tradesmen.1 Entering into these newly established settlements were the effects of religious revivalism originating in the East and New England. The most important group emerging from this movement was the Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

Led by the charismatic Joseph Smith, the Mormons emerged from the millennialist groups of the second Great Awakening to establish themselves as a large and fast-growing religious sect. Smith's message and the Mormon religious doctrine were based upon the Book of Mormon, Smith's own translation of metallic tablets, or plates, said to contain the history of the ancient inhabitants of North America. These ancient plates were said to be made of gold and were presented to