The Very First Mormon Was Also the First Mormon to Run for President

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Mitt Romney is the first Mormon to run for president as the nominee of a major party. But he is not the first Mormon to seek the office. Joseph Smith, oracle, prophet and founder of the Mormon faith, ran as an independent candidate for president in the election of 1844. There is one stark difference between the two campaigns: Several polls have shown Romney running neck and neck with Barack Obama in his bid for the White House; Smith was murdered by a mob. America is a more tolerant place than it was in 1844. But the culture of Mormonism is not quite the same as it was in its founding era. The arc Mormons have followed shows how outsiders assimilate to the American mainstream.

Smith was born in Vermont in 1805 and moved with his family to western New York a decade later. In his 20s he said an angel directed him to a site near his home where he found buried golden plates whose inscriptions revealed that Jesus had appeared in pre-Columbian America. The King James Bible known to most Americans was incomplete, Smith proclaimed, and he had the missing pieces. From them he created the Book of Mormon, published in Palmyra, N.Y., in 1830.

Western New York was the early 19th-century equivalent of beat and hippie California; it was called the burned-over district because so many religious and social prophets took fire there: revivalists, Shakers, spiritualists, feminists, sexual communists, preachers of the end of the world. Even in this atmosphere, Smith and his claims seemed outre -- he was altering the founding narrative of Christianity. So he looked for new territories where people who shared his belief in the Book of Mormon could be free from skepticism and harassment. He moved first to Kirtland, Ohio, near Cleveland, then to northwestern Missouri.

Everywhere they went, Smith and his followers faced opposition. The more converts they made, the more non-Mormons feared they would take over local governments by voting as a bloc. In October 1838, the governor of Missouri ordered that Mormons "be exterminated or driven from the state." Smith was arrested and charged with treason, though in April 1839 he escaped, possibly with a wink and a nod from officials who simply wanted him gone. The Mormons resettled in central Illinois on the Mississippi River in a town they named Nauvoo.

Smith tried to make Nauvoo safe for Mormons by turning it into a state within a state. He was mayor, chief justice and lieutenant general of a militia, the Nauvoo Legion; his dress uniform was decorated with ostrich feathers. Comparing him to Muhammad, the New York Herald wrote, "His ambition is to found a religious empire."

At the same time, Smith sought leverage in the national political arena. The presidential election of 1844 looked to be a free-for-all. The incumbent, John Tyler, was an unpopular placeholder who had been promoted to the Oval Office by the death of William Henry Harrison. In November 1843, Smith wrote five of the politicians vying to succeed Tyler, asking how they would treat Mormons if elected. They answered evasively. Henry Clay, Whig nationalist, refused to make deals with "any particular portion of the people." John Calhoun, states' rights Southerner, thought that Mormons did not "come within the jurisdiction of the federal government."

In January 1844, Smith offered himself as a candidate, with firebrand Mormon orator Sidney Rigdon as his running mate. Smith's platform was an amalgam. Some of it was bipartisan boilerplate. "We have had Whig and Democratic presidents long enough," he declared. "We need a president of the United States." Some of it was plain old populism: Smith wanted to cut congressional pay to $2 a day, plus board. "That is more than the farmer gets, and he lives honestly." Some of it was mixed church and state. "I go for theodemocracy, where God and the people hold the power." If the people were unsure about God's
intentions, presumably Smith would instruct them. In place of an ordinary party organization, made up of local officeholders nationwide, Smith counted on Mormon missionaries to campaign for him.

Smith did not have a prayer of winning. There were only 12,000 Mormons in Nauvoo, plus several thousand more across the country, out of a national electorate of 1.7 million voters. But he was an early practitioner of pressure group politics -- using a third party to put an issue on the map or affect close races. "Joe Smith does not expect to be elected president," wrote the New York Herald, "but he still wants to have a finger in the pie."

Smith did not live to test his gambit. During his years in Nauvoo he had acted on one of his most inflammatory revelations, the doctrine of "plural marriage," or polygamy. In the spring of 1844, disgruntled ex-Mormons attacked polygamy in a new newspaper, the Nauvoo Expositor. They called for reforms in the church. In retaliation, faithful Mormons destroyed the Expositor's presses.

There was an outcry against "Mormon mobocrats," and the governor of Illinois asked Smith to turn himself in for inciting a riot. In June 1844, he surrendered to authorities in Carthage, Ill., near Nauvoo. Days later a mob attacked the jail, and shot and killed Smith and his brother. Brigham Young, who had helped establish the Kirtland community, took charge of the sect and led it to Utah.

In the meantime, the outcome of the 1844 election was determined by a separate political pressure group -- the abolitionist Liberty Party -- which siphoned off enough Whig votes in New York and Michigan to tip those states and the election to the Democrats.

Whatever happens in the 2012 election, it is beyond the realm of possibility that Mitt Romney will be arrested or murdered by a mob. During the 20th century, people of many religions and races outside the white Protestant mainstream began rising to the top. By now Catholics, Jews and blacks have run for president, served in Congress or sat on the Supreme Court. A Mormon presidential candidate is just one more square in the quilt of diversity.

Mormonism has changed as well. Without abandoning its beliefs about Jesus and the Bible, the Mormon church has modified some of its doctrines. Mormons gave up their paramilitary arm in the mid-19th century. In 1890, Wilford Woodruff, fourth leader of the church, ordered his flock "to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land." Both acts came in response to federal pressure: President Buchanan sent the army to Utah in the late 1850s to assert federal authority, and Congress toughened anti-polygamy laws in the 1880s.

Mitt Romney is a product of a kinder, gentler Mormonism. His faith is important to him, but he does not wear it on his sleeve. Unlike Joseph Smith, he is running to win, not to make a point about his religion.

As sociologist John Murray Cuddihy observed, when European religions and ideologies "land on American shores...they are taught to behave. They are tamed." The taming process happens to made-in-America religions and ideologies too. While there are plenty of separatists on the margins of American life, from the Amish to the Nation of Islam, almost every group that interacts with the wider world at some point sheds its bark and smooths its rough edges. In time, one of their number may run for president.

"Growing up near Palmyra, N.Y., I saw the Hill Cumorah Pageant, an open-air dramatization of the Book of Mormon"

-- Richard Brookhiser
Mueller: The first official Mormon mission in history was at the end of 1830, when Joseph Smith sent his most important lieutenants to the Delaware Indians who had been pushed west to what is contemporary Kansas. In other words, the first Mormon mission was to convert Native Americans. That urge to redeem the native people of America remains a key feature. The Indian Student Placement Program was an institutional project, and I do think it was a racially tinged project to civilize large numbers of Native American children. Unity is very important for Mormons. Religious unity used to be mapped onto racial unity. Today, it’s celebrating racial difference and racial history as a key part of the church. Victoria Woodhull was the first woman to run for president in the United States. Woodhull was known for her radicalism as a woman suffrage activist and her role in a sex scandal involving a noted preacher of the time, Henry Ward Beecher. Belva Lockwood, an activist for voting rights for women and for African-Americans, was also one of the first women lawyers in the United States. Her campaign for president in 1884 was the first full-scale national campaign of a woman running for president. Laura Clay.