

# Flashback

*To know nothing of what happened before you were born is to remain ever a child—Cicero*

## The Prophet Who Ran for President

By Bill Kauffman

**Q:** Who was the first U.S. Presidential candidate to be assassinated? The folks in the best position to win this toughest of all bar bets are, alas, usually absent from the bar. They are the Mormons, and the answer to this question is none other than Joseph Smith, “The Prophet,” founder of their faith and independent candidate for the Presidency in 1844.

Smith biographer Fawn Brodie denies that his candidacy was motivated by “preposterous megalomania.” Rather, Smith seems to have run for the more mundane reason of defending his flock. Unable to obtain redress at the federal level for the Mormon persecutions in Missouri, Smith called states rights “a stink offering in the nose of the Almighty” and demanded protection from Washington.

In November 1843 he asked the leading candidates for President, Henry Clay, John Calhoun, Richard Johnson, Lewis Cass, and Martin Van Buren, “What will be your rule of action relative to us as a people should fortune favor your ascendancy to the chief magistracy?”

In best strict construction fashion, none gave him satisfaction. Clay offered the example of “my whole life, character and conduct” as pledge that he would treat the Mormons justly, to which Smith replied, “Your ‘whole life, character and conduct’ have been spotted with deeds that cause a blush upon the face of a virtuous patriot; so you must be contented with your lot, while crime, cowardice, cupidity or low cunning have handed you down from the high tower of a

statesman to the black hole of a gambler.”

A Smith-Clay alliance seemed doubtful.

Declaring, “We have as good a right to make a political party to gain power to defend ourselves as for demagogues to make use of our religion to get power to destroy us,” Joseph Smith launched an independent candidacy for President.

Smith set out his views in a curious eight-page document which Mormon missionaries distributed throughout the country. His platform blended pique and prophecy, the quotidian and the exotically idealistic. Angry that Congress had not responded to Mormon cries for help, he pledged to “reduce Congress at least one half” and cut members’ pay.

Like the nascent Liberty Party, Smith took up the cause of abolition, which will surprise those who know Mormonism only as the faith that denied the priesthood to blacks until 1978. “Break the shackles from the poor black man,” he pled, suggesting that slaveowners might be compensated by revenues from the sale of public lands.

Sailing in the mainstream, Smith promised “more economy...less taxes” and a “judicious tariff,” and lest the reader suspect that the Prophet had forgotten his own people, he called for the President to be granted “full power to send an army to suppress mobs,” even over the objection of a state’s governor.

What is most beguiling about the document, however, is Smith’s view of crime and punishment: He was against both. “Petition your state legislatures to pardon every convict in their several penitentiaries,” Smith urged, “blessing

*Joseph Smith opposed incarceration for all crimes but murder. Try running on that platform in Utah today.*

them as they go, and saying to them in the name of the Lord, *go thy way and sin no more.*” Try running on that platform in Utah today.

Smith opposed incarceration for all crimes but murder. Instead, miscreants ought to work on the roads or “any place where the culprit can be taught more wisdom and more virtue.” Smith reminded those hardhearts who doubted that criminals might be reformed that “Love conquers all.”

On June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith was murdered by an Illinois mob in the Carthage jail, where he had been confined for ordering the burning of an anti-Mormon printing press. Freedom of the press met freedom of religion, and both lost.

Smith’s rallying cries of “Theodemocracy!” and “Open the prisons!” never quite caught on. But the founder of the most successful American-born religion did speak in the native tongue, rising to almost Whitmanesque effusions: “Oh, then, create confidence! Restore freedom! Break down slavery! Banish imprisonment for debt, and be in love, fellowship, and peace with all the world.”

Or as a later non-Mormon, Elvis Costello, once sang, What’s so funny ‘bout peace, love, and understanding?





## The God-Fearing Media

By Chris Weinkopf

“Do most Americans realize just how fervent the President’s evangelical faith is?”

So asks the *New York Times*’ Alessandra Stanley, in her review of the PBS “Frontline” documentary, “The Jesus Factor,” which examines the role of faith in George W. Bush’s life and Presidency. Stanley believes that Americans would be distressed to know that Bush engages in such outlandish behavior as daily Bible-reading, prayer, and allowing his spiritual life to inform his political one. After all, *she* is.

Among members of the establishment media, Stanley is not alone. In its review, the *Los Angeles Times* describes the President as possessed by “a fervor that might take everyone, even [Bush’s parents] by surprise.” The *New York Daily News* calls “Jesus Factor” filmmaker Raney Aronson “impressively open-minded and objective,” but concludes that, “based on the evidence presented, the same cannot be said of President Bush.”

It’s hard to imagine similar treatment of other major politicians. No one would ever suggest that Joe Lieberman is, well, too Jewish for the Presidency. Nor did the press ever much fret that being Baptist might have rendered Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton immune to critical thinking. The media typically portray Senator John Kerry’s heterodox brand of Catholicism as a badge of honor.

But Bush is different—a devout, observant, conservative believer. As far as the establishment media are concerned, he might just as well be from Mars.

Still, “The Jesus Factor” goes to great lengths to portray Bush’s faith evenhandedly. It is not the documentary that speaks ominously of Bush’s “fervor,” but its reviewers. Why could that be?

Well, consider what Aronson said, in an NPR interview, about people’s responses to an anecdote in her film: “Secular people, when they heard that the President felt called to run for the Presidency by God, felt very alarmed. What I found on the religious side was, well, they weren’t alarmed at all. In fact, they were comforted by this idea.”

As with an inkblot test, reactions to “The Jesus Factor” say more about the viewer than the documentary itself. People with religious faith, and those who bear no animus toward them, found the program’s depiction of Bush inspiring. Diehard secularists found it frightening. And while the American public might straddle that cultural divide, the media elite almost uniformly fall on the anti-religion side.

Even PBS can’t avoid a certain sense of bemusement in its descriptions of these earnest Bible-thumpers. At times, its documentary takes on the same curiously detached tone of a *National Geographic* special on African bushmen, describing in fascinated detail the strange, alien beliefs that, to much of the American public, are simply part of everyday life.

The announcer explains, in that serious, public-broadcasting voice: “*Conservative evangelicals consider the Bible to be the word of God, and without error.... To evangelicals, it is not their Christian denomination that connects them but a series of beliefs. One of the most important*

*is committing yourself to Jesus Christ, or being ‘born again.’*”

You almost expect him to continue: “*While the men are out hunting lions, the women fashion nose rings from the bones of small rodents.*”

But to the blue-state, secularized urbanites who dominate most major media, an evangelical—or, for that matter, a devout, conservative religious person of any kind—is truly a foreign creature. Thus the confusing, often contradictory reporting about Bush’s faith. Depending on the story, he’s either a self-righteous true-believer who won’t let anything stand in the way of his mission from God, or he’s a phony who invokes “the Almighty” to score points with the much-maligned Christian Right.

Yet for all the mainstream media’s consternation over Bush’s religion, the American public takes a decidedly different view. “The Jesus Factor” notes—to the dismay of some reviewers—that the two Bush Presidencies prove that a candidate can lose every other demographic and still win the White House on the strength of the evangelical vote alone. Lost on the producers, and for that matter, the critics, is an understanding of what that means: These odd religious creatures aren’t radically outside the mainstream; they *are* the mainstream.

Yes, the American people know how religious the President is. The real question is, do most reporters realize just how “fervent” the American public is?

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