

IN PURSUIT



LESSON #21 • FROM JAMES BUCHANAN

COMPROMISE THAT BETRAYS VALUES ALIENATES ALL SIDES



by Drew Gilpin Faust

James Buchanan is customarily regarded as one of the worst American presidents, assailed for his failure to act to prevent southern secession during his 120 days as a lame duck after Lincoln's election in November 1860. Yet Buchanan took office as one of the most experienced politicians ever to enter the White House. He had served as a Pennsylvania state legislator, Congressman and Senator, ambassador to both Russia and Great Britain, and Secretary of State. At one point, he sought and then ultimately declined appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Buchanan is also the only U.S. President never to marry. A number of his contemporaries mocked him as effeminate: Andrew Jackson referred to him as "Aunt Nancy;" President James K. Polk said he behaved like "an old maid;" political cartoons depicted him dressed in women's clothes. Modern scholars have speculated that he was gay, and his intense friendship with Congressman William King of Alabama has raised questions about both his sexuality and the sources of his southern sympathies.

A staunch Jacksonian Democrat, Buchanan was, in the language of his era, a northern man of southern principles. He opposed any direct challenge to slavery, believing the institution would gradually die of its own accord. He abhorred what he saw as the fanaticism of abolitionism, which he thought would destroy the nation.

LESSON #17

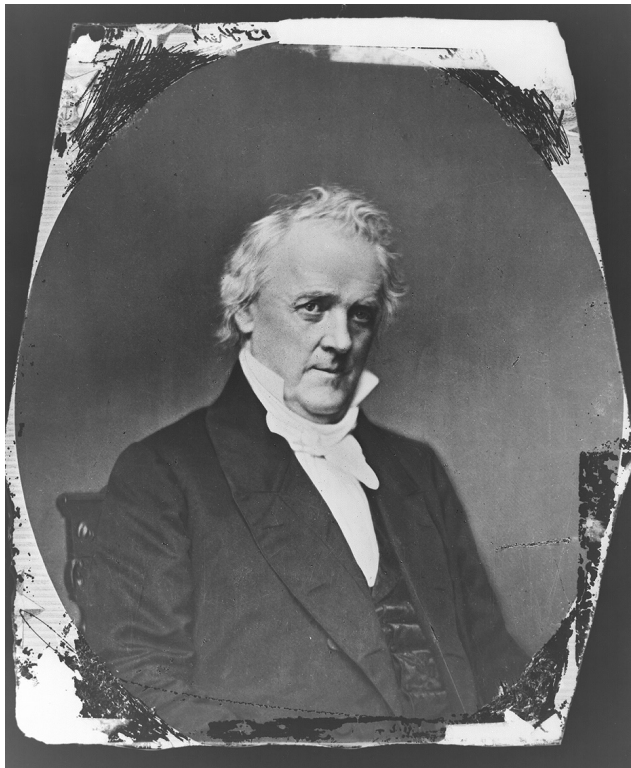
Compromise that betrays fundamental values will alienate all sides.

In 1856, at age 65, Buchanan achieved his lifelong goal of election to the presidency. Even before his inauguration, he sought to calm mounting hostilities between North and South by surreptitiously intervening in the Supreme Court's deliberations in the high-profile case of Dred Scott, an enslaved man who claimed his freedom because he had lived on free soil. Buchanan believed that the Court had the opportunity to settle the slavery controversy definitively, so he wrote an associate justice urging that the case be broadly and comprehensively decided to affirm slavery's legitimacy. Chief Justice Roger Taney issued a decision that asserted that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in the territories and that African Americans could not be citizens and possessed no rights "the white man was bound to respect." The Court's action and the breathtaking scope of the decision were greeted with northern uproar, intensifying rather than dampening the national divisions over slavery.

Buchanan persisted in his efforts to appease the South during the battle over slavery in Kansas Territory. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 had provided that settlers in the territory could decide by popular sovereignty whether slavery should be allowed. Competing pro- and anti-slavery governments emerged, and Buchanan took the side of the slaveholders and their clearly fraudulent Lecompton Constitution, which proposed Kansas's admission as a new state and had been advanced by a minority of voters through violence and political manipulation. Congress refused to admit Kansas to the Union on such terms, insisting that the state constitution be submitted to a fair vote. Buchanan's continuing support for the pro-slavery faction resulted in a split in his Democratic Party, whose northern wing refused to support the president

in spite of pressure he exerted through patronage and bribes in his search for Congressional votes. As a result of the controversy, American political parties became sectional rather than national, sowing the seeds for Lincoln's election as the candidate of the exclusively northern Republican Party less than three years later.

Buchanan's aggressive and expansionist foreign policy deferred to southern views as well. He declared that national security concerns mandated the acquisition of Cuba, which he feared might otherwise become a site for uprisings that would disrupt the slave institution in the United States, as the Haitian Revolution had in 1791. Buchanan's dedication to America's manifest destiny led him to exert military control over parts of Mexico, send thousands of sailors and Marines to Paraguay to protect American property rights, and threaten Britain over a boundary dispute in the Pacific Northwest. But his southern sympathies would not permit him to



James Buchanan | Brady Daguerreotype

act so firmly in the face of southern secession.

When South Carolina seceded in December 1860, just over a month after Lincoln's election, Buchanan denied that a state had a constitutional right to secede, prompting hostile reactions from southern politicians and newspaper editors. But he also denied that the federal government had the right under the Constitution's enumerated powers to do anything about it. By the end of his term on March 4, 1861, seven states had left the Union, and Buchanan's inaction had provided them time to organize their new nation and its defense.



South Carolina's "Ultimatum" | Currier & Ives

But Buchanan's failures involved more than just passivity. Before Lincoln's election, when General Winfield Scott, head of the U.S. Army, urged Buchanan to transfer additional troops to federal military installations in the South, Buchanan refused. He openly received commissioners from South Carolina after its secession, seeking to negotiate with those he should more properly have treated as traitors. Yet he angered Confederate leaders with an unsuccessful effort in January 1861 to resupply Union forces at Fort Sumter. When the South seized federal property—post offices, courtrooms, forts—Buchanan offered no federal response. As secession gained momentum, his conciliatory attitudes and ongoing connections with prominent southern politicians encouraged resistance and led many Confederate supporters to believe their departure was all but risk-free. They were lulled into convincing themselves that war was unimaginable.

In January 1861, when South Carolinians fired on a ship bringing men and supplies to Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor, Buchanan gave no order to respond to this act of war. Perhaps his close ties to southerners in his cabinet and in Congress led him to imagine that the mounting tensions could be managed and mitigated as

North-South conflicts had been over the course of his long political career. Perhaps his decades of experience had taught him exactly the wrong lesson. This time would be different, and Buchanan would leave office and return to his Pennsylvania home in shame. Although he supported the Union when war broke out, he regularly received threats and hate mail. The U.S. Senate considered a resolution of condemnation for his failures during the secession winter, but it never passed.

In the years that remained to him, Buchanan would struggle to rehabilitate his name. In 1866, he published a lengthy defense of his actions and proclaimed himself “completely satisfied” with all he had done. He has not convinced posterity.