



LESSON #19 • FROM FRANKLIN PIERCE

MISREADING A NATION'S MORALS CAN TURN CATASTROPHIC



by David W. Blight

“Seldom was a President so out of touch with public opinion,” the biographer Larry Gara wrote of Franklin Pierce, the fourteenth American to hold the office of chief executive. He failed to recognize the national mood shifting even as the country’s political party system unraveled, the Union teetered on the brink of disaster, and slavery increasingly drove Americans to fear and despise each other, North and South. We expect those in power to do more than heedlessly follow the vox populi, but Pierce’s underwhelming presidency reinforces that leaders who misread the moral direction of the nation can turn political caution into historical catastrophe.

At first blush, Pierce appeared as prepared for the presidency as anyone in the antebellum era. He was born in Hillsboro, New Hampshire, in 1804, the son of a Revolutionary War general turned governor of New Hampshire. Intelligent, good looking, socially pleasing—often called “courtly and polished”—Pierce had a rapid rise. He graduated from Bowdoin College, and at 22 was already practicing law. He was a state legislator at 24, the assembly’s speaker at 26, a U.S. Congressman at 29, and a U.S. senator at 33.

Pierce married Jane Meyer Appleton, the daughter of Bowdoin’s president, but their domestic life was unhappy and tragic. Washington political life was awash in alcohol, and Pierce became a permanent victim

of its drinking culture. Jane hated politics and public life in general and remained deeply religious and withdrawn.

In 1842, Pierce tried to give up politics altogether and returned to New Hampshire to practice law. When the Mexican War broke out in 1846, Pierce joined the army and quickly rose from private to brigadier general. In a battle, amidst exploding shells, his horse bucked and threw him. Pierce sustained a torn knee and internal injuries, which caused him to faint from pain, but he stayed with his troops through the campaign to take Mexico City. Even after he became president, people would refer to him as “general.”

As the question of slavery’s expansion exploded in the wake of the Mexican War and the nation’s new territorial acquisitions, the New Englander maintained close ties to Southerners in his party. He believed firmly in states’ rights and in restraining federal power, and openly supported slaveholders’ rights to their “property” in people. Pierce wholeheartedly embraced the Compromise of 1850, especially the Fugitive Slave Act—hated in the North—as a means of sustaining the Union. Even as resistance to the Compromise began to unravel the Whig party and caused terrible fissures in his own Democratic party, Pierce remained a believer that the Union would hold firm against agitation. Indeed, Pierce had only contempt for abolitionists, who he thought were fanatics and religious zealots.

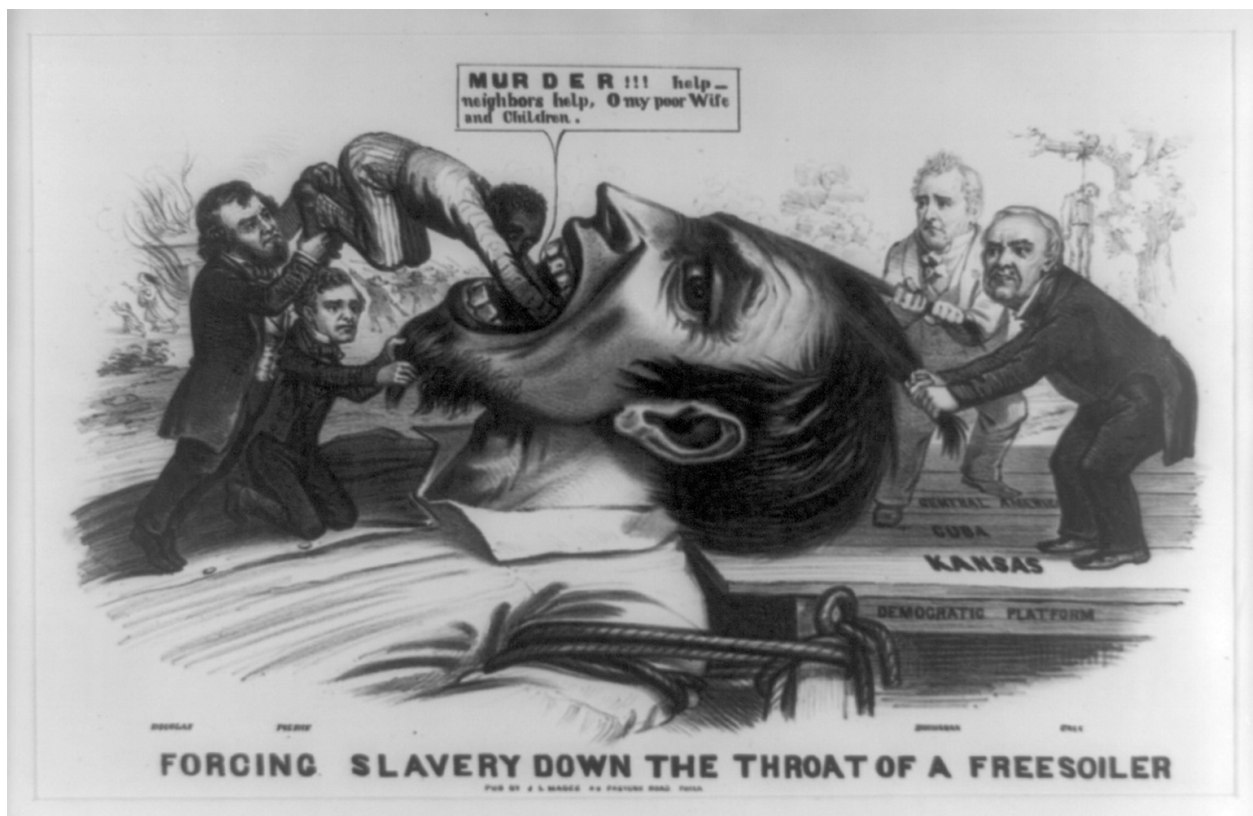
By the early 1850s Pierce saw slavery as a question that the Constitution and American institutions would contain and solve, if only the fanatics could be thwarted. He advocated a muscular American expansionism, within North America and beyond, but never fully grasped how nearly every step in the nation’s geographical growth invited a struggle over the future of slavery. Along with Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Pierce believed that the vastness of the North American continent could absorb, even resolve, a divisive problem like slavery.

Pierce was an improbable, dark-horse candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1852. When several likelier candidates deadlocked at the national convention, the party’s powerbrokers sought a compromise candidate. Pierce showed no open enthusiasm for the nod, but his supporters—including his good friend and Bowdoin classmate, the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne—pushed hard for him. Pierce was nominated on the forty-ninth ballot, receiving the news with “no thrill of joy, but a sadness.” His wife Jane fainted.

Reluctant, but with politics still in his blood, Pierce ran against General Winfield Scott, whom the Whigs ran as the “hero” of the Mexican War. By contrast, the Whigs missed no opportunity to portray Pierce as the “fainting general” and the “hero of many a well-fought bottle.” Despite or perhaps because of his efforts to be all things to all people, Pierce won the popular vote 1,601,017 to 1,385,453, and decisively won the electoral college count by 254–42. The Free Soil Party candidate, abolitionist John P. Hale, an open enemy of Pierce’s in New Hampshire, received 155,825 votes.



Franklin Pierce Daguerreotype | National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



FORCING SLAVERY DOWN THE THROAT OF A FREESOILER | John L. Magee

Before the inauguration, tragedy struck. The Pierces experienced a train wreck in Massachusetts. The president-elect and his wife escaped almost unhurt, but the crash killed their eleven-year-old son Bennie. Jane never recovered from the loss and her husband was subdued at best throughout the inauguration. All three of the Pierce children were now dead, their first son having died in infancy and their second of typhus at age four. The Pierce White House became a place of gloom; Jane went into seclusion.

In office, Pierce built a cabinet and a policy agenda that was decidedly pro-Southern and proslavery. His closest friend and advisor was his secretary of war, Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi. Many Northern Democrats thought Pierce would stand up to the “Slave Power,” but one Southern delegate at the convention had another attitude: “All admit that Pierce is as sound on all Southern questions as any Southern man.”

Pierce could have led the turbulent Congress and the country toward some sort of resolution of the slavery expansion question. Yet for Pierce and the nation’s political culture, that proved impossible. From 1853 to 1856, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and ensuing border civil war in the new territory over the future of slavery itself—“Bleeding Kansas”—ruined the Pierce presidency. In 1854, a new antislavery coalition party of Northerners, born of feverish resistance to the Kansas policy of Pierce’s administration, soon became the most rapidly successful third-party movement in American history: the Republicans.

That same year, after long months of planning and debate, Stephen Douglas led the Democrats’ quest for a law that would organize the vast new territories of Kansas and Nebraska. Douglas succumbed to Southern pressure and crafted a bill that repealed the 34-year-old provision from the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had eliminated slavery forever above the thirty-six-thirty degree parallel across the American West. For so many Northerners across party lines this meant a betrayal of a sacred pledge about the future of slavery in America. Yet the out-of-touch Pierce fully supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, as well as further measures in the violent and corrupt politics of the vigilante war in Kansas. The president misread the new

“free soil” ideology of many Northern immigrants and native-born Americans who saw the West as their opportunity of mobility for the common man, unencumbered by slaveholding oligarchies.

By 1856, Pierce’s proslavery leanings had made him so unpopular that he was defeated in his bid for renomination at Democratic convention—the first elected president to seek his party’s renomination and not receive it. The week he left office, the Supreme Court delivered the Dred Scott decision, in effect opening up the entire West to the possible expansion of slavery, thus placing the American experiment in dire jeopardy.

When the Civil War came in 1861, Pierce obstinately opposed the Union war effort by the Lincoln administration—even the recruitment of the Union armies. He opposed the Emancipation Proclamation and expressed only contempt for Abraham Lincoln, causing some to accuse him of disloyalty. He thought the Union war “cruel, heartless...” and driven by “madness and imbecility.”

Pierce never accepted the revolutionary changes of the Civil War’s final years. To anyone who would listen he proclaimed: “I cannot... bow to the storm.” An admirable sentiment, perhaps. But Pierce, like most leaders, would have been better off had he minded the winds and rains of that impending tempest. He died a solitary man at his home in New Hampshire on October 8, 1869. His own state would not publicly honor him for fifty years.