

### "Old Buck" and the Political Crisis of the 1850s

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2008

**Childers, Christopher** *"Old Buck" and the Political Crisis of the 1850s.*

James Buchanan has never enjoyed a good reputation among historians and president-raters; most people rate his presidency at or near the worst in American history. Yet even as students of the 1850s note his shortcomings, many—if not most—of the scholars of this period qualify their answer. For James Buchanan—the “Old Public Functionary”—possessed perhaps the most experience of any president in our history. Buchanan’s résumé reveals a man immersed in the American political system. Congressman, senator, minister to the Court of St. James, minister to Russia, secretary of state; Buchanan held all these positions in a political career that spanned from the 1820s to the commencement of the Civil War. By almost any measure, James Buchanan had sterling credentials for the office of president.

Some of America’s most prominent historians have exhibited ambivalence—at best—about the 15th president. More often, Old Buck has faced withering criticism. For example, Kenneth M. Stampp addressed Buchanan in two of his books: *And the War Came* (1950) and *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (1990). One of the northern Democrats’ most sympathetic historians, Roy F. Nichols, lauded Stampp for taking a “sensible view” of Buchanan, “making him neither the villain nor the constitutional saint.” Forty years later, however, even Stampp penned a scathing portrait of Buchanan. In the 1950s and 1960s, historians like Nichols concerned themselves with offering a fair assessment of the “Old Public Functionary.” Philip Shriver Klein’s 1962 biography of Buchanan embodies this principle; nearly all its reviewers commented on the fair and impartial approach (in their estimation) of the book. Klein offers the most sympathetic treatment of the 15th president. However, Stampp’s latter portrait better characterizes the typical approach of recent Buchanan historiography. Certainly Jean Baker’s recent portrayal of Buchanan fits this view.

Last month, a panel of distinguished historians gathered in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, James Buchanan's hometown, to participate in a symposium on the man and the crises he faced during his presidency. On the symposium's first night, participants assembled on the grounds of Buchanan's home, Wheatland, for a discussion between two of the greatest historians of the 1850s—Michael F. Holt and William Freehling.

Interestingly, the majority of the questions that Holt and Freehling fielded concerned counterfactuals—the great “What Ifs?” of history. What if Buchanan had stuck with his earlier advocacy of extending the Missouri Compromise line rather than endorsing the Kansas-Nebraska Act? What if Buchanan had asserted national authority in the Kansas imbroglio? What if Buchanan had taken a stronger posture in the secession crisis? The Buchanan presidency seems to provoke many “what if” questions from people who cannot escape the conclusion that many things went terribly wrong between the years of 1857 and 1861.

The next day, the symposium shifted to Franklin & Marshall College, where Buchanan served as president of the board of trustees from 1852 to 1866. Old Buck certainly had a few sympathizers in the crowd; one man rose at the end of the last session to praise Buchanan, especially given the fact that he has endured ceaseless criticism for 150 years. Few historical figures have endured such scrutiny and disdain, the man argued. And yet, even the most ardent Buchanan supporters—from the Lancaster community and elsewhere—eventually concede that the president's record certainly does not merit praise. Of course, many of the panelists grappled with this very question. Buchanan biographer (and symposium participant) Jean Baker has phrased the dilemma well, asking “why such a well-trained and well-intentioned public figure could have failed so abominably”?

Most all of the panelists agreed: James Buchanan's was a failed presidency. And when someone spoke of his strengths, they surely did not speak of the sectional crisis. John Belohlavek spoke positively of Buchanan's skill at managing foreign policy, while William B. MacKinnon praised his decisive efforts at ending the Mormon crisis in Utah. But a strong foreign policy aimed at territorial expansion and the tamping down of rebellion in Utah did not assuage most of the scholars at this symposium, who generally viewed Old Buck's presidency harshly. Indeed, while other panelists conceded Belohlavek's point, they noted that Buchanan tended to flee domestic crises by attending to foreign

affairs.

In all fairness, and in spite of Buchanan's obvious shortcomings, most of the historians agreed that Buchanan inherited a terrible situation. As Nicole Etcheson pointed out, the crisis in Kansas had already spun out of control as proslavery and antislavery settlers in the territory made a mockery of Stephen Douglas's popular sovereignty doctrine. And as Holt and Freehling—two grey giants of the field—ably discussed, the great party system that had given form and organization to political conflict was in disarray. A sectional party had risen from the ashes of the Whig Party and the short-lived Know Nothings to challenge the Democrats. And while the feckless Republican candidate John C. Fremont lost his bid for the presidency in 1856, the specter of a sectional party hostile to southern interests threatened political stability and provoked bitter recriminations from southern Democrats and northern doughfaces.

Amidst this turmoil, James Buchanan won the presidency. Yet the scholars at Lancaster generally agreed that Buchanan made a bad situation worse. As Maury Klein noted, Buchanan picked an ineffective cabinet. Secretary of State Lewis Cass had long passed his prime and served as a mere figurehead; John B. Floyd, the Secretary of War, appeared downright crooked, especially after a congressional investigation severely tarnished the Buchanan administration's image. At the outset of his presidency, Buchanan had tried to craft a sectionally balanced Cabinet and in the end created a mess. Perhaps more notably, Buchanan's meddling in the Dred Scott case created a firestorm in the North at the very beginning of his presidency. The president's statement that he would "cheerfully submit" to the Supreme Court's decision in the case followed a brief conference between Buchanan and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney moments before he took the oath of office. But this paled in comparison to allegations that Buchanan had personally encouraged his friend Justice Robert C. Grier to vote with the majority and deny Scott's plea. Legal historian Paul Finkelman presented a compelling argument that Buchanan's early actions immediately handicapped his administration.

By 1860, old battles over Kansas, the Dred Scott decision, and internecine struggles within the Democratic Party had weakened the American political establishment and had rendered the Buchanan administration ineffective. When Abraham Lincoln won election to the presidency in November 1860, without a single electoral vote from the South, a crisis had finally emerged that compromise would not avert. But Buchanan faced his own crisis, in what Jean

Baker has called his “extraordinary contradiction” that while Buchanan believed the Union inviolable, “he held no coercive power to prevent or overturn an illegal act by a state.” Buchanan’s belief that he possessed no power to maintain the Union paralyzed his administration and seemingly limited him to a wait-and-see approach, hoping that calmer heads would prevail and the crisis would pass. Jean Baker, Daniel Crofts, and Michael Holt discussed Buchanan’s actions in the secession crisis, a course that strongly favored the South. Buchanan seemed increasingly impotent in addressing the issues that the crisis posed and even acquiescent in the course of secession, to the point where he prepared to order Major Robert Anderson from Fort Sumter back to the scuttled Fort Moultrie, a move that essentially surrendered the federal installations in South Carolina. Only when three of Buchanan’s cabinet members threatened resignation did Buchanan change his course and take a more Unionist stance. In many respects, Buchanan seemed all too willing to leave the crisis for Lincoln to manage.

Buchanan left the presidency in disgrace, and ever since historians have damned his administration for its ineptitude and ineffectiveness. Why then hold a symposium on the fifteenth president? In contrast, we certainly will not see symposiums on Warren G. Harding—the runner-up to Buchanan as America’s worst president in a recent *U.S. News* survey—any time soon! Each historian at this conference answered this question definitively. While the Buchanan presidency surely failed, no one can doubt the import of his presidential years. He presided over a nation in turmoil, on the brink of the most celebrated and well-studied event in U.S. history, the Civil War. Yet as more than one scholar at this symposium argued, Buchanan was the wrong president at the wrong time. Sterling credentials aside, Buchanan lacked the ability to deal with the issues he faced. That makes his presidency a failure, but it makes study of the presidency of James Buchanan essential.

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*This column also appears in a longer format in the journal Common-Place.*