

## James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s: A Panel Discussion

Moderated by Michael J. Birkner  
Gettysburg College

*Editor's note: For two days in September, 1991, Franklin & Marshall College sponsored a bicentennial conference on the life and times of James Buchanan, marking the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Pennsylvania's only president. Papers were delivered on a range of subjects, including assessments of Buchanan's political leadership, his foreign policy, and his health. On Saturday, September 21, four leading scholars formed a panel to reassess James Buchanan's presidential leadership. Before a large audience in F&M's Stager Hall, Kenneth Stampp, Elbert Smith, Don Fehrenbacher and Robert Johannsen provided acute and occasionally clashing commentary on a dramatic era. Among the members of the audience was Buchanan's leading biographer, Philip S. Klein, emeritus Professor of History at the Pennsylvania State University and a former president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association. It seems appropriate to dedicate what follows to the memory of Philip Klein. He was a distinguished scholar and gentleman, and a great friend of the PHA and other historical associations.*

*The transcript below has been edited for clarity and focus. A copy of the original tape has been deposited in the Franklin & Marshall College archives. I am indebted to Dr. David Stameshkin, Executive Assistant to President H. Richard Kneedler, for his extraordinary effort to bring such talent to the F&M campus and for his ongoing support for this enterprise. Ms. Jo Larsen, in the office of the president at F&M, did superb work transcribing. MJB*

**Michael Birkner:** If I can have everyone's attention, we're going to get started. For the past day and a half we have been hearing scholarly papers, offering incisive insights into James Buchanan's politics and statecraft. This morning we have an opportunity for a more informal session with four distinguished American historians, people who have written important work on the 1850's and the Civil War era.

I'm Michael Birkner from Gettysburg College. I'll be moderating this session and I want to introduce each of the panelists in a moment. But I thought first it might be useful to provide some historical context for the discussion that will follow. I'll then introduce the panelists and then let them have their say, because this is their session.

In the winter of 1857, as James Buchanan was preparing to assume the office that he had sought for so long, much of the American public felt that it had been rescued from a dangerous crisis. Had the Republican Party captured the White House in 1856, many southern Democrats said they simply would not accept the results. Who could foretell the consequences had John Charles Frémont been elected President in James Buchanan's stead? And we all know that it was, indeed, a very close call. The break-up of the Union seemed possible, if not necessarily imminent as a consequence of a Republican victory in 1856. But Frémont wasn't elected in 1856. Buchanan was elected primarily because of his strong showing in the South where Fremont won virtually no votes at all. He was a Black Republican to southerners and simply unacceptable. Buchanan was acceptable to southerners. He was a canny politician. He was, most importantly, a Union man to the core. The question facing Buchanan and the country, as he prepared to assume the presidency in March of 1857, was whether he could hold his party and the nation together in the face of sectional distrust and deep sectional antagonism. This, of course, is the problematic of Buchanan's presidency whether you are a revisionist on Buchanan or not. How well Buchanan handled the demands on him comprises the topic for discussion this morning. We are very fortunate to have with us four scholars who have written extensively on the 1850's. Each has offered pungent commentary on Buchanan in the course of writing broader works on the period and I want now to introduce them and we can welcome them together. [Birkner proceeds to introduce the panelists, who are warmly welcomed by the audience.]

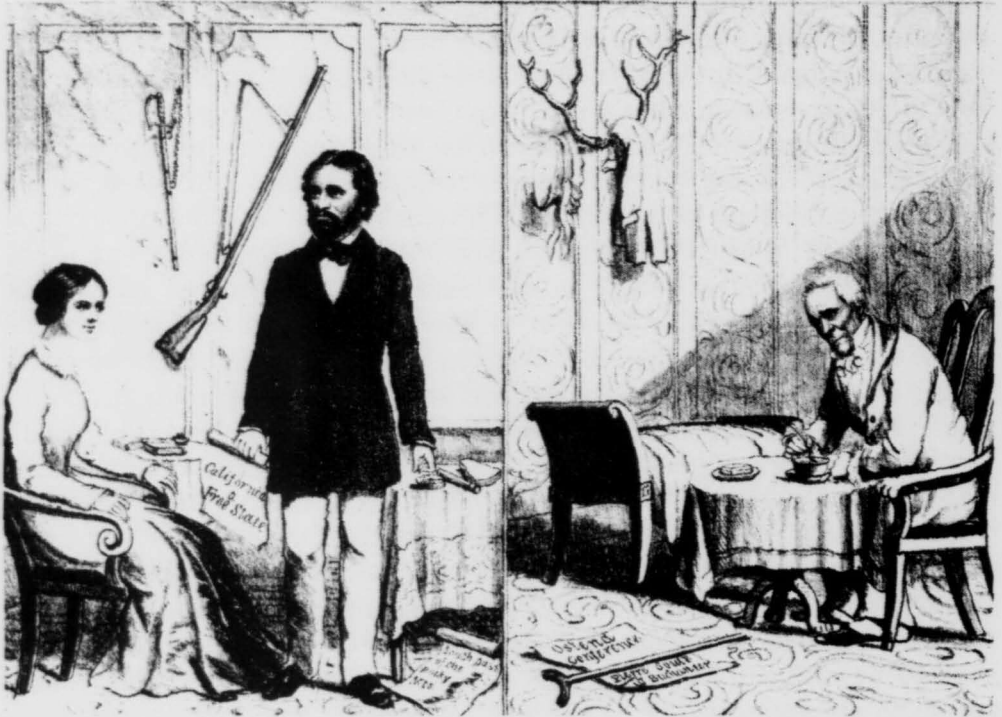
I would like to begin with Professor Smith, to set the scene for March of 1857 as Buchanan prepares to assume the presidency. What was uppermost on his mind as he planned his inaugural?

**Elbert Smith:** . . . Buchanan had this in mind: How do I make certain the Republicans don't win in 1860? On the other hand, I don't think he thought through this very clearly. Incidentally, it is important to note, that he wrote his own speeches and he wrote his own inaugural [address], unlike most presidents today. He had also been very seriously ill with dysentery, a form of Legionnaires' Disease, and whether or not that affected his judgment, we don't know. The North needed reas-

suring if it was going to stop attacking the South and thereby playing into the hands of the southern radicals and Buchanan does not do this. . . . Buchanan never understood that the Free-Soil Movement, the idea that slavery should not expand, was a mass opinion, that great numbers of northerners believed this. This was not just the idea of a small number of Republican fanatics. His immediate problem was how to handle the question that had been the major part of his platform, popular sovereignty. And the big question was when should the decision be made. Should it be made at the point when a territorial government was created or should it be made at the point when a territory became a state? The Democrats very wisely didn't tackle that part of it at all. So that southerners could believe that popular sovereignty meant deciding on slavery at statehood, and the northerners could believe the opposite. You might ask what's the difference. A very significant difference it seems to me. If after the South had access to a territory for a reasonable length of time, and then that territory voted to be a free state, you could say, well it's because of climate, geography, economics, all kinds of different reasons. On the other hand, if you cut off slavery at the beginning, it could only be for moral reasons, and the South, I think, very much objected to this. In 1848, for example, when they were debating over Oregon, and Thomas Hart Benton and Sam Houston said, "who's going, . . . who's taking slaves to Oregon," [John. C.] Calhoun said, "that doesn't matter. The admission of Oregon without slavery, is an insult to my heritage. It's an insult to my descendants, and that's more than enough reason for secession. On that basis, we should secede." So Buchanan has to deal with this, and he wrote letters to two Supreme Court Justices, he knew they had the Dred Scott case, and I'm going to leave that to Professor Fehrenbacher, who is a real expert on it. But he definitely used influence on one Pennsylvania judge to get him to fall in line with this. Knowing the South would be very happy with it, apparently completely blind to the reaction it's going to cause in the North, he . . . makes it clear that he knows that it's coming and says in his inaugural address, "Some people have asked the question, when do we decide this?" Well, he said, "the whole question of territorial slavery is going to be answered by the Supreme Court in a few days." Therefore, when the case does come out he is completely identified with it. Those, it seems to me, are his main points. He doesn't think slavery will go to the West; he doesn't really want slavery to go to the West. But he's perfectly willing to give the South the right to take slavery to the West or anywhere else, not thinking it will mean anything and, again, quite oblivious to the reaction this is going to [provoke] in the North.

## THE CANDIDATES.

YOUNG AMERICA.....AND.....OLD FOGYISM.)



This 1856 campaign poster credits Republican candidate John C. Frémont with securing the admission of California as a free state and derides his Democratic opponent, James Buchanan, for endorsing the Ostend Manifesto, which urged U.S. seizure of Cuba.

**Birkner:** I think it might be appropriate now to talk a little about the man who takes the presidency in 1857. We've had numerous comments made in the papers today and in side comments here for the last two days that on paper Buchanan was well qualified to be president of the United States and he was in many ways someone who gave people a sense of confidence and comfort because he would not have to be trained for the job. And yet, something is wrong there and, I think, Professor Stamp might be in a position to help us understand the disjunction between the paper credentials and the reality.

**Kenneth Stamp:** You might ask whether it was just that Buchanan was elected at the wrong time. I think probably he never would have done very well. [Laughter] I don't think that there was ever a right time. He might have done as well as Warren

Harding. [Laughter] I'd like to give two explanations of why I think so. One relates to the matter in which he formed his cabinet and another relates to, I think, an excellent example of how he bungled even the use of patronage. It's true that Buchanan was superbly trained. We've already heard about his background in Congress and the Senate, diplomatic service in the State Department, and his background and experience contrasted with Lincoln's lack of experience. One spent one term in the Congress and two terms in the state legislature. I don't think we ought to use this as an example of how it always will be—that it is better to have an inexperienced man like Lincoln than a well-trained, superbly trained president like James Buchanan. Because I don't think it's going to work that way invariably. I think we have had many examples of the opposite. But in choosing his cabinet Buchanan showed no interest at all in harmonizing the various divisions and factions in the party. The Democratic party, like the Republican party, was full of factions and divisions. In the South, you had Conservative-Union Democrats, you had out-and-out Secessionists, and States-Rights Democrats ready to jump off the reservation at the first thing that they would regard as a provocation. In the North, you had Doughfaces, northern men with southern principles, you had young Democrats who looked to Stephen A. Douglas, the so-called Young America wing of the party. And somehow, Buchanan should have, I think, brought representatives of all of these groups into his cabinet. Instead, he set up a cabinet of men who agreed with him. He wanted no conflict in his cabinet. He wanted sort of be Chairman of the Board and have a cabinet that would work in harmony with him. As a result, I think, it is absolutely wrong to say that Buchanan was dominated by a directory, by a group of powerful cabinet members, for example Jeremiah Black of Pennsylvania and Howell Cobb of Georgia. He simply agreed with them. They agreed with him. There was no dispute. The cabinet was a most harmonious group. There is lots of testimony from Cobb and others: we meet together, we are fond of each other, we have no difference of opinion. Consider the way he picked a Secretary of State. There were two possibilities: Howell Cobb of Georgia, who is eminently qualified, and Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, a northerner who had moved to Mississippi, also eminently qualified. The trouble was that if either one of them had been brought into his cabinet there would be problems. Both of them had lots of enemies, so in the end he took the advice of his friend, J. Glancy Jones of Pennsylvania, who suggested "why not bring in Lewis Cass." Now Lewis Cass is incompetent, he's much too old, but he won't offend anybody. Nobody will regard him as a political rival. So Buchanan decided in the end to forget about Cobb and Walker,

and invite Lewis Cass to come into the cabinet on condition that he would let Buchanan pick his Assistant Secretary of State, a close friend of Buchanan's, and really on condition that Buchanan and the Assistant Secretary of State would run the State Department and Lewis Cass would sign things. Cass was so happy, his term in the Senate was just expiring, he was so happy to stay on in Washington that he agreed to these terms and he was for four years a cipher in the Buchanan administration, till the very end. At the very end Cass suddenly decided that Buchanan wasn't a staunch enough of a Unionist and he resigned from the cabinet in indignation. It was the only thing he ever did of any significance in the four years as Secretary of State. His resignation was the great moment of his four years. [Laughter]

Now let me give you one example of his bungling with patronage. Unquestionably, the man who made it possible for Buchanan to be elected in 1956 was John W. Forney, a Pennsylvania newspaperman, who was chairman of the Democratic Committee in Pennsylvania who was responsible for carrying that state. He had many ways of doing it. He got lots of Irish voters in Philadelphia and eastern Pennsylvania on the voting lists in time to cast their votes for Buchanan, who incidentally carried Pennsylvania by a scant 1000 votes. Buchanan was so grateful to Forney for the work he did in Pennsylvania and for other things (he contributed his own money to the campaign in Pennsylvania) that he told Forney that he was going to offer him the editorship of *The Washington Union*, which was a Democratic newspaper in Washington, and that is exactly what Forney wanted. He was a superb editor but, also, it meant that he could, after four years, retire in comfort because printing contracts would come to him from the Democratic Congress that would put him on easy street. The trouble was that Buchanan had never checked to see how the party would react to Forney becoming the editor of *The Washington Union* and he discovered, shortly after the election, that a vast number of southerners were almost livid at the thought of Forney editing *The Washington Union*. They didn't trust him, and there were reasons why they shouldn't trust him. In any case, Buchanan discovered that it would be impossible and so he called Forney in and said, "I'm sorry. I can't give you the editorship. I've got to find something else for you." Very quickly, after that disappointment, Forney came to Buchanan and said "I'll tell you what. I would really like to go to the United States Senate and there is going to be a vacancy. The Democrats are the majority in the legislature. I'd like you to support me for the Senate." Well, Buchanan said, "all right" and that would take care of that. There was one little problem and that is that he had already prom-

ised Jeremiah Black that he was going to support him for the Senate. So the first thing that he had to do was to write to Black and say, "Would you please permit me to withdraw my offer to support you for the Senate?" Black, somewhat reluctantly, fortunately he was a good friend of Forney's, agreed to do it. So Buchanan let it be known that Forney was his candidate for the Senate. Well, the Democrats had a majority in the legislature. It was very thin majority. Lots of Democrats resented Buchanan's intervening and, in the end, several Democrats switched, several refused to vote, and several switched to the Republican candidate, that prince of a man, Simon Cameron [Laughter], and Buchanan suffered a humiliating defeat and there was still the Forney problem. What next? Well, Forney would have loved to have gotten into the cabinet. Buchanan thought Forney wasn't fit for that. Forney was rather erratic, he got into his cups quite frequently, and he was not tactful in his conversations, and that was out of the question. Buchanan finally said, "How would you like to be American Consul in Liverpool?" Forney said, "After what I've done for you, Mr. President, that's a pretty humiliating thing. I'm not going to take that." For a long time nothing happened. Poor Mrs. Forney, who had several children and was expecting another one, went to Buchanan and said, "What is to become of my family? Surely, you can give him the Postmastership. He won't disgrace you if you give him the Postmastership. Nothing happened. Forney became increasingly desperate. He wrote to Jeremiah Black, his friend. He wrote to Buchanan. Finally, he announced in June 1857 that he was going to start his own newspaper in Philadelphia, *The Philadelphia Press*. Well that really worried Buchanan. Finally, he announced in June 1857 that he was going to start his own edit a pro-administration newspaper. Forney assured him that he was going to be loyal to the administration. Well, he started *The Philadelphia Press* and it quickly became the most popular Democratic newspaper in Pennsylvania. It practically drove *The Philadelphia Pennsylvanian*, which was run by an incompetent editor, to the wall and by the late fall of 1857 he had broken with Buchanan over the Lecompton issue. He was supporting Douglas; he was now giving his loyalty to Douglas as he had given it to Buchanan for so many years. And that was a beautiful example of his mishandling of patronage. Incidentally, in addition to that, Forney had succeeded in talking Buchanan out of bringing the one man from Pennsylvania that he wanted in his cabinet and that was J. Glancy Jones, who was a Congressman and a very close friend of Buchanan's. Forney said "over my dead body. You cannot put that man into the administration." And so Buchanan had to write a letter to Jones saying, "I wish you'd permit me to withdraw my offer of a position

within the cabinet.” Jones said, “I know who’s behind this. I know it’s Forney and his clan. For heaven’s sake, don’t appoint Jeremiah Black to your cabinet because everybody knows he is nothing but a tool of Forney’s.” He reluctantly did give his consent to withdrawing his candidacy for the cabinet and promised to be a loyal supporter of Buchanan, and he was. Buchanan wrote again and said “now that you’ve withdrawn, I have to ask you one more favor, would you please agree that Black can go into the cabinet.” And Jones had to concede to that. This is about as bad a job of handling a number of important appointments as you can imagine. I think these examples are enough to illustrate my point that he simply wasn’t the man cut out to be the Chief Executive of the United States then or any other time, and I’ll stop there.

**Birkner:** One of the things that we learn here is that Buchanan set off on the wrong foot on the issue of patronage. At least in retrospect it appears that he may have gotten off on the wrong foot in terms of his relationship with another branch of government, the Supreme Court. And I thought since it occurs right at the beginning of the Buchanan presidency we might want to get some sense of what he is up to even before his inauguration, in terms of a crucial decision about to be handed down on the slavery issue by the Supreme Court. I think Professor Fehrenbacher is the right person to ask this. What is going on and what does it tell you about Buchanan?

**Don Fehrenbacher:** Well, let me say just a word first about why Buchanan took the attitude that he did towards the Dred Scott case and the decision which was forthcoming. Buchanan was an active presidential candidate for about ten years, from about 1846 to 1856, and in 1850, during the crisis of that year, some enemies turned up a newspaper report from 1819 showing that he had been a member of a Resolutions Committee for a meeting right here in Lancaster that had opposed the Missouri Compromise, which he later urged and recommended, and had favored the proposed anti-slavery restriction on Missouri. He immediately began to get queries, particularly a letter from Jefferson Davis, and so he wrote a letter to Jefferson Davis in which he attributed to his youth and to the influence of the chairman of the meeting, who was an old friend, and then he went on “through my whole public career I have been uniform in maintaining the just constitutional rights of the South. I have made more speeches on this subject, both on the floor of the Senate and at home, than probably any other man now living.” This letter was not put before the public until during the Civil War when *Harper’s Weekly* called it a “cringing, fawning, supplicating, shivering, slobbering piece of servile obsequious-



ness.” [Laughter] Which is an interesting bit of nineteenth century tautological redundancy. I don’t think lackey of the South is quite the right term. I agree with that. Pro-slavery is not quite the right term. Certainly, pro-Southern or, perhaps, anti-anti-slavery would be as good a description of Buchanan’s attitude at least from the late 1820’s and early 1830’s. From his experience in Congress and, particularly in the Senate during the great controversy over petitions, Buchanan became absolutely convinced that the slavery issue, if agitated, was going to destroy the Union. I think he believed that sincerely. I think that was the strongest motivation that he had. Mind you, he had other reasons to be pro-Southern. It was politically suitable for him to be pro-Southern. There were other reasons why he was anti-anti-slavery. He was temperamentally not tuned to the abolitionist self-righteous approach. He was a man of the middle ground. Basically, the thing that drove him most was his fear of a break-up of the Union owing to the slavery agitation. He became increasingly convinced that that had to somehow be repressed or suppressed if the Union was to survive, and he had that feeling, certainly, at the time of his inauguration. Now, the Dred Scott case had been in the works for a decade and there was no doubt that the Court was going to decide against poor Dred Scott himself and send him back to slavery. There was no doubt about that. The main question was whether the Court was going to give a broad decision or a narrow decision, and it could have avoided all of the major issues by simply upholding the view of a lower court that Dred Scott, whatever had happened to him in Illinois and in Minnesota, when he returned to Missouri, had returned to Missouri law and was, therefore, still a slave, and the Court had actually decided that was the decision that was to be issued. Justice [Samuel] Nelson of New York was to issue this narrow decision, and he even wrote it. In fact you can read it because he submitted it eventually as his concurring opinion. But then, for various reasons, the Court changed its mind and decided to address the larger questions. One, the question of Negro citizenship, which was really not politically important. Although, historically, it’s important to us today, it was not politically important at that time. And the question of whether Congress had the power to prohibit slavery in the territories or, in other words, the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise line. A decision was made to render the broader decision. Buchanan, it is thought by some people, played a critical role in that decision. It was quite clear that the five southern justices on the Court were prepared to rule against the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise but, if they got only five votes, all southern, declaring that, the effect of the decision was liable to be very doubtful, to



Chief Justice Roger B. Taney handed down the Dred Scott decision. Northerners decried Taney's ruling that Negroes "had no rights which the white man is bound to respect."

say the least. What was badly needed, from Buchanan's point of view, was at least one justice from the North who would go along with the invalidation of the Missouri Compromise line. Well, two justices were out of the question because they were opposed to the entire attitude of the majority. They were going to be dissenters. Nelson had already made up his mind that he preferred the narrow decision. That left only one, a Pennsylvania named [Robert] Grier, Justice Grier, and it was upon Grier that Buchanan, at the urging of another Justice, another member of the Court, brought some pressure, and we know then that, as a consequence, the Court divided six to two, two really not voting, on the question of whether the Missouri Compromise line was really unconstitutional. And that made it appear, at least a bit more, as a national decision rather than a strictly sectional one. Roy Nichols thinks that the Dred Scott would have been entirely different without Buchanan's intervention behind the scenes. What is ignored in most of these presentations, and in the idea that it was the fault of the two dissenting justices, that the broader decision was issued, is the failure to take into account the determination of the Chief Justice who issued a broader decision. The willpower really in effect here, most, was not so much Buchanan's, not the dissenting justices', but it was [Roger Brooke] Taney's. I am convinced of that and, therefore, while Buchanan certainly made it easier by the pressure he brought on Grier, the

Dred Scott decision as issued was, in its broader frame, what the Chief Justice desired. Of course, Buchanan wanted a decision because it would presumably remove from politics the issue that was most troubling, the nation as a whole. It was not only causing the quarrel between Republicans and Democrats, that is the question of whether slavery could or should be forbidden in the territories; the whole question was dividing the Democratic Party itself. As has already been suggested, the Democratic Party had endorsed the principle of popular sovereignty. What does popular sovereignty mean? Well, to most of the people who use the term it meant that the people in the territory should decide whether they were to have slavery. But, southerners claimed that it meant making the decision only at the time of statehood, which really was no popular sovereignty at all because everyone had always admitted that a free state had the right to decide whether it should be free or slave. The Democratic Party had hung together now for several years by having a policy of popular sovereignty which was defined in two ways: one in the North, and one in the South. And it was to the advantage of the Democratic Party to continue that ambiguity. Yet Buchanan and a number of other Democrats unwisely encouraged the Court to remove that ambiguity by, in effect, adopting the southern interpretation of popular sovereignty—that is, by declaring that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional. That was to take the southern side completely. One of the mysteries is that Buchanan did not, if you look at his inaugural, say that this was the question before the Court. He did not say that the Missouri Compromise issue was before the Court, or the question of slavery in the territories. He said that the issue troubling the Democrats was before the Court, that is whether popular sovereignty could take effect at the time of the organization of the territory or at the time of the organization of the state. Therefore, he said, happily this question is now before the Court. Which was not true at all. The Court had no reason, in considering the Dred Scott case, to take up the question that divided the southerners from Douglas. Furthermore, the Court didn't decide that. There is nothing in the decision except in the opinion of the Chief Justice as a statement that probably did not have the standing of law. So, the mystery to me is how Buchanan got the notion that the Court was going to decide that question of the timing of popular sovereignty. He couldn't have gotten it from the two justices with whom he was in communication. The only answer that I can suggest is that he was also, perhaps orally, personally in communication with the Chief Justice. Because it was only in the Chief Justice's opinion that a decision was rendered that, in effect, outlawed Douglas-style popular sovereignty as well as Republican-style prohibition of slavery in the territories.

**Birkner:** I suppose one of the other mysteries of the Dred Scott case may be that Buchanan expected that it would quiet deep sectional bitterness and the clamor over popular sovereignty.

**Fehrenbacher:** Yes, let me say that, as late as 1860 in his last annual message to Congress, he finally really commented on the substance of the Dred Scott case by congratulating the nation on the Dred Scott decision and how it had settled matters.

**Birkner:** So he sort of missed the boat. [Laughter] One thing we know about the Dred Scott case is that it sets the stage for a tremendous drama which is played out in 1857 which Professor Stampf has written about with great force. But the drama is in large measure a personal drama. It's Buchanan and it's Douglas. Buchanan fixes on the Kansas issue. He is determined to take a path that Douglas ultimately cannot accept, and Douglas speaks out . . . in opposition to Buchanan, the president of his party's fixed position on this issue. And it seems to me that Professor Johannsen can help us understand the dynamics of Buchanan's decision on Kansas and Douglas's decision to oppose him. And I hope you would want to say a word, Professor Johannsen, about something that festers underneath all of this, and that is about the bad blood between Buchanan and Douglas.

**Robert Johannsen:** I don't want to say too much about that. The title of this panel discussion is "A Reassessment of Buchanan." I think we need a lot more work on Buchanan. Everybody is an expert on Buchanan based on sharp focusing on certain aspects of his presidency. Buchanan is treated primarily by historians as a sort of supporting character, supporting player, to a study of somebody else—Abraham Lincoln or the study of a single year in the Buchanan administration, or something like that. I am just amazed that there hasn't been more work on Buchanan. We have two biographies of Buchanan, in 1883 the George Ticknor Curtis's *Life and Letters of James Buchanan* and then we have Philip Klein's 1962 *President James Buchanan: A Biography*, and thirdly we have E. B. Smith's study of the presidency. But isn't there a lot more to be said about James Buchanan than can be said in these three widely spaced studies? I have always felt that we needed to know more about Buchanan, more about his career, more about his position on the issues over the years, the stands he took, and that sort of thing. . . . One thing we need to do is spend more time looking at Buchanan's total career instead of picking out an episode, things that he couldn't do, his incompetence in this respect or in that respect. Andrew Jackson mishandled patronage from time to time. There are some glaring examples; it's not unique. We've got to look at him in greater perspective; we've got to know more about him. Many years ago, I reviewed a couple of books

on James Buchanan. At that time, I expressed some disappointment because I found little written about him that would explain Buchanan's approach to the presidential office, his concept of the presidency so to speak. I asked a number of questions that I thought might place Buchanan, give us a better notion of what Buchanan meant, what Buchanan stood for, and a better understanding of how and why he acted as he did. Because certainly we know that this administration was beset with a great many crises. How did he bring his experience to bear on the problems he faced? The constitutional issues? What was the character of that? How did he define his presidential role in the face of deep national crisis? What was his concept, his view, of the power of the presidency, the function, the obligation, the responsibilities of the presidential office. I think that there is a lot that could be done in that respect.

Yesterday morning, we were given a classic description of the Jacksonian Presidency. The Jackson concept of a strong, aggressive president, director of all his people, and so forth. Professor [William] Gienapp suggested that Lincoln followed this Jacksonian concept, but Buchanan fell dreadfully short. Well, not all political leaders in the United States, presidential aspirants or otherwise, agreed with Andrew Jackson's concept of the presidency.

With respect to Douglas, I feel that Douglas has been treated much the same way we find Buchanan described here today. So I feel a kind of empathy with the old Public Functionary, because I have been struggling against similar charges. Douglas was allegedly a tool of the South, no matter what he did, he was down on his narrow bones before the altar of the slave power and the minion of the pro-slavery forces—that sort of thing. The same sorts of things we are talking about Buchanan, captive of the South. We never speak of anybody during this period as being the captive of the North, a captive of the abolitionists who argues against slavery. We still struggle against, feel the impact of the legacy of the Civil War.

Now the Douglas-Buchanan split was not regarded by all contemporaries as an earth-shaking development. Abraham Lincoln in 1858 said that the rift between Douglas and Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution was of no real importance. He advised Republicans to ignore it, pay no attention to it, it doesn't matter. On the contrary, Lincoln saw Douglas and Buchanan as working together in spite of this rift.

**Fehrenbacher:** Excuse me. Lincoln did that for strategic reasons. He was working against the efforts of certain Republicans in the East to paint Douglas as—

**Johannsen:** I know. But why don't we give Buchanan or Douglas credit sometimes for working for strategic reasons.

**Smith:** Lincoln wants to get elected Senator, and everybody knows that everybody in Illinois hates Buchanan so he identifies Buchanan with Douglas to defeat Douglas in the election.

**Fehrenbacher:** He's trying to push Douglas as close as he possibly can to the pro-slavery side.

**Johannsen:** You didn't let me complete my thought.

**Fehrenbacher:** I'm sorry, go ahead. I won't interrupt you again until you deserve it. [Laughter]

**Johannsen:** I would be disappointed if you didn't. I want interaction.

**Stampp:** You mention that Douglas and Buchanan were constantly called tools of the slave powers, and that no one was ever called a tool of the North. Which southerners did you have in mind to play these roles? I was just wondering whether there was one.

**Johannsen:** But you see, I'm asking the question.

**Stampp:** But in the case of the so-called Doughfaces, these were northerners who were tools of the South. I was wondering which southerners were tools of the North.

**Member of the Audience:** Henry Clay.

**Stampp:** He's not a southerner. He's a westerner.

**Smith:** Some people call Zachary Taylor a tool of the North even though he owned 140 slaves.

**Johannsen:** One thing I have been impressed with is that we have difficulty recognizing the fact that some fifteen slave holding states were actually part of the Union, they were part of the United States. We talk about they were somehow not really Americans, not really a part of the Union. I suppose this is the legacy of the Civil War. The North won the Civil War. The North interprets the history of the United States in the ante-bellum period, and we are still arguing it.

**Fehrenbacher:** But there was a Doughface factor in American politics down to the Civil War which meant that you cannot name any person who achieved high executive office who didn't have in some way or the other to make his peace with the South. And southerners, to hold high executive office, did *not* have to make their peace with the anti-slavery forces. A John C. Calhoun could be unanimously approved by the Senate for the position of Secretary of State, but no person could become Secretary of State who was in any way associated with a strong anti-slavery viewpoint, until the time of Lincoln. This had been building up for years, so that when we talk about anti-slavery we should think of anti-Southernism, too, in the

North and resentment of the extent to which the South had dominated the country.

**Johannsen:** The position that Buchanan took was to be fair and just to both sides, because if it wasn't the balance in the Union went askew and Douglas felt, as you said Buchanan felt earlier in the 1830s, that the anti-slavery agitation would destroy the Union. Douglas felt . . . you can't argue moral arguments because there is no compromise, there is no way minds can meet. Southerners have their standards of morality, and northerners have their standards of morality and never the twain shall meet. And he said, a number of times, the only way this question would be settled was through fighting or bloodshed, a bloody civil war. Of course, that's what happened.

**Smith:** Here you have two people who apparently agree with each other on most of these policies, and yet Buchanan does everything he possibly can to keep Douglas from getting elected president in 1860 and senator in 1858. My question simply is, did personal relations play that big a part in keeping these two people at each other's throat?

**Johannsen:** Yes, I think it fed on itself. Douglas did feel aggrieved that he wasn't consulted by Buchanan. . . .

**Smith:** I think it's significant that Douglas claimed that he spent \$42,000 of his own money helping Buchanan get elected, and Buchanan wrote him a letter of thanks addressed to "The Honorable Samuel A. Douglas." That would upset anybody.

**Johannsen:** Do you think that was a deliberate slight?

**Smith:** Are you going to say that he didn't know Douglas's first name? [Laughter]

**Fehrenbacher:** Maybe he was getting old. [Laughter] Bob, let me ask you one further question about Douglas in the break with Buchanan. Would you be willing to agree, to some extent, that Douglas by 1858 had come to recognize that as far as his constituency in Illinois was concerned he was carrying all the southern weight that he could and, in fact, had to make some gesture towards anti-slavery in order to stay in power?

**Johannsen:** Well, you use the word gesture and carrying weight, suggesting the problem was sincerity.

**Fehrenbacher:** No, no. I wouldn't want to exclude that but I'm saying that simply as a matter of political strategy, the same strategy that Lincoln would use and did, in what Lincoln had to say about Negro equality. Wasn't Douglas consulting political strategy to some extent for his own benefit in the stand that he took against Lecompton?

**Johannsen:** Sure. You're absolutely right. He was simply reflecting the wisdom of his constituents and he was simply building on statements he had made in 1854 and 1850 and even the late 1840's. There was nothing new about his stand. In fact in 1858, he confronted Lincoln, questioned Lincoln's irrepressible conflict notion. It's exactly what he's afraid of. Let me just add, when he questioned Lincoln's use of the "house divided" metaphor, Lincoln responded, "Mr. Douglas, your quarrel is not with me, but with a higher authority," because this was a paraphrase of Jesus Christ, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." He said, "If you believe that a house divided can stand, then you're at war with our Saviour, not with me."

**Birkner:** If I could exercise a moderator's privilege here, I think old Buck deserves to be factored back into the action. It seems to me whether we are dealing with a sympathetic view of Buchanan's presidency such as you get in the biography by Professor Klein or a less than sympathetic reading such as you get in *America in 1857*, a recent book by Professor Stamp, we're dealing here where he has to make some very hard decisions about the Kansas issue and we can't leave Kansas out of the story quite so readily perhaps as Professor Johannsen would have us do. I would like to ask Professor Stamp about something that intrigues me, because I hadn't read it until I looked at his book, and that is the kinds of options that Buchanan had in 1857. It seems that his options were, perhaps, broader than we traditionally thought. Would you comment on that?

**Stamp:** Well, I think he had two options. One, doing what he did, which was disastrous; and the other, doing what he said he was going to do. And that was to insist that the Lecompton Constitution be submitted to an honest vote, the whole constitution. He made the commitment in his inaugural address, where he talked about submitting the document. He made the commitment to Robert J. Walker when Walker agreed to be governor of Kansas. Walker sent a note to Buchanan saying, "It is my understanding that you and your cabinet are in agreement with my proposal that this constitution must be submitted for ratification." Walker mentioned that in his inaugural address in Kansas and told the delegates to the convention that he would urge Congress not to admit Kansas if the constitution were not submitted for ratification. He got a lot of static out of the South, and Buchanan's organ, *The Washington Union*, stood by Walker. Buchanan wrote a letter to Walker on the 12th of July, 1857 saying, "I will stand or fall on my commitment of the submission of the constitution for ratification." There is no evidence whatsoever that Buchanan indicated that he was breaking away from that until the Lecompton Convention executed that, so called juggle, of letting the people vote for the future



admission of slaves or not. But, providing that the slaves there would continue in slavery and Buchanan suddenly discovered then that that's what he had meant all along. He had never intended that the whole constitution be submitted to ratification. The only important issue, as he expressed through Black in an editorial in *The Washington Union*, was the question of the further admission of slaves into Kansas. As far as the slaves already in Kansas, he said the Dred Scott decision protected them. Which is utter nonsense. The Dred Scott decision did no such thing. Any state had the right to abolish slavery, whatever slavery there was in that state. The Dred Scott decision did not dispense [with that reality]. He claimed that was the only issue, and it wasn't the only issue. The Lecompton Constitution rigged representation in Kansas. It provided that all the fraudulent votes that had been cast in Magee County and Oxford precinct were to be counted as legal, and representation was to be based on the illegal votes that had been cast. There were questions involving the expenditure of money for internal improvements; there were questions for banking; there were questions for the location of the capital of Kansas. All of them were crucial issues, and it's probably true that the people in Kansas, the majority in Kansas, wouldn't have voted for that constitution if it had been written by the most honest body of men you could imagine. They weren't going to have anything to do with the Lecompton Constitution, and one of the arguments used against submitting it was that if they had submitted it, it would have been voted down by the people, so what's the point of submitting it, they won't even consider it. You've got to go behind the motives of the voters. If they vote against it for the wrong reasons, they have no right to be given the chance to vote for it in the first place. It was an unbelievable switch in strategy on Buchanan's part. But let me say this in defense of Buchanan. Buchanan really thought he could pull it off and, remember, he came awfully close. He got it through the Senate easily. He came within eight votes of getting that approved by the House of Representatives. Five votes the other way would have switched it. If they could have bought five more men, they could have passed it. [Laughter] I don't know whether Buchanan ever thought about this, but Douglas had really set a precedent for him. Douglas had raised a hell of a fuss back in 1854 with his Kansas-Nebraska Act, and two years later the Democrats won the presidential election again. This is 1857, Buchanan was raising a hell of a fuss but supposing he brought Kansas in under the Lecompton Constitution, as he almost did. What would have been the situation in 1860? I don't know. But he might have thought, they'll cool off by 1860 and we'll have a harmonious convention and a chance to win the presidency again. It was a

bad guess. It was a terrible miscalculation. But it almost did work.

**Fehrenbacher:** He thought, didn't he, that by 1860, Kansas as an independent state would have abolished slavery?

**Stampp:** Right.

**Birkner:** So far it seems as if the Buchanan presidency goes into a black hole after the Lecompton Constitution fight winds down. I'm just curious whether any of our panelists here, as part of this reassessment, want to say anything about the fact that we tend as historians to focus on the Lecompton Constitution, or some foreign policy episodes as Professor [Robert] May spoke about this morning, then we, of course, go to the secession crisis. Is this, as Professor Johannsen suggests, an understudied presidency?

**Smith:** It seems to me that Phil Klein has told us all that we ever need to know about Buchanan as a person. He was a highly intelligent, extremely ambitious man who wanted to be president. Over a long period he had formed a great many personal friendships with southerners, I suspect because they were the ones who left their wives at home when they came to Washington, and so he spent his time in Washington with southerners at boarding houses and so on. He obviously had very deep personal affections there and, so when he gets into the White House and become president, he acts on these emotions and these ideas and these feelings that he has. I don't know what else we would try to learn about him. Professor Johannsen says that we need to learn more about him. Where would we start? Where would Phil start if he had to do Buchanan all over again?

**Stampp:** Professor [Mark] Summers gave us some idea of what was going on between 1857 and 1860, and that's an important part of the Buchanan administration.

**Birkner:** I see that Professor Klein is seeking the floor and I think he's entitled to it. [Philip S. Klein stands up and speaks in favor of Buchanan's plan for Kansas since it was likely to result in the freeing of slaves in Kansas.]

**Smith:** Could a majority, was a majority big enough to amend the constitution? And the Lecompton Constitution said you can't change it until 1864.

**Fehrenbacher:** From the northern viewpoint, why should the Free-Soil majority in Kansas have to accept slave-state status, and then abolish slavery later on. At least that was their attitude and that's why they rejected it. I'd like to ask Professor Johannsen, why did Douglas reject the English compromise which would have seemed to have met most of his objections?

**Stampp:** Let me give one reason. Senator [David C.] Broderick said that, if he



*Violence swept Kansas in the mid-1850s. In the Marais des Cygnes massacre five free-soldiers were killed by proslavery forces seeking revenge for the murders committed by fanatic abolitionist John Brown and his followers at Pottawatomie Creek.*

endorsed any compromise, he was going to publicly denounce Douglas. Douglas did waiver but the anti-Lecompton Democrats got to him and threatened him if he broke away, and so he changed his mind and denounced it.

**Johannsen:** At the same time, he regarded that compromise as being kind of a compromise of his initial position and his stringent insistence that this was a travesty on popular sovereignty. The constitution should have been presented in its entirety to the electorate.

**Fehrenbacher:** But everyone knew it was a Southern surrender agreement, a face-saving southern surrender.

**Johannsen:** The English Bill? Yes. That's right, because southerners' faced the prospect if they did win the Lecompton Constitution, if they did win Kansas as a slave state, it would be a Republican slave state and that so confused the situation. But Douglas felt that the constitution should be submitted without a lot of this compromise language.

**Stampp:** He wanted a flat vote for or against the Lecompton Constitution and the English bill phrased it in such a way it was a subterfuge. It sounded as if they were voting on the land grant, and that's what the Republicans objected to, that's what

most of the anti-Lecompton Democrats objected to, and ultimately, when Douglas denounced it, that's the point he made. Well, he made two points actually, and that is for not ratifying it, there was a penalty, and that is they wouldn't be admitted to statehood until they had the 93,000 or whatever population was required, whereas, if they ratified it, they'd be admitted to statehood immediately, and Douglas said that is unfair. It penalized them for rejecting the Constitution and rewarded them for ratifying it. So it's another joke.

**Birkner:** We are going to come in a moment or two to the end of the formal part of an informal session, so that people will have the opportunity to ask their questions. Before we do though I wanted to give Professor Fehrenbacher a chance to comment on something that is relative to the Buchanan presidency and this is the debate on the African slave trade, the opening, which some southerners were for and some were not. Professor Fehrenbacher has a comment he would like to share with us.

**Fehrenbacher:** Very briefly, I won't go into any detail but I will say, simply, that there were two slave-trade crises that Buchanan faced. One was the effort by certain southerners to revive the African slave trade, both by direct action, in the case of actually going and getting slaves in the case of the ship *Wanderer*, and also urging a repeal of the federal laws against it. Buchanan took a definite stand against that. The other thing is that a crisis with England over the British search of American ships involved in the slave trade to Cuba, which was the only slave trade that Americans had been involved in for 40 years. And the Buchanan administration in rejecting British intervention, took the stand that the United States could do its own law enforcing and, therefore, was under some obligation to do a better job of law enforcing. As a result, this is something that few people know, the Buchanan administration has the best record of any administration on suppression of the African slave trade. More slave ships were captured in the Buchanan administration, and particularly in the years 1859, '60, and '61, than in any previous administration by far. And one of those ships captured was the *Erie*, which was captained by a certain Nathaniel Gordon, who some of you may remember was the only person ever executed for slave-trading under American law, and Lincoln refused to commute his sentence or pardon him. He was actually hanged. But he was arrested during the Buchanan administration.

**Stampp:** There is another point to be made. He was taken to New York and tried there, and not in Florida or Georgia.

**Smith:** He had a lot of people arrested but nobody convicted up till Gordon.

**Fehrenbacher:** No. In a number of other criminal trials, southerners had refused to convict. But the arrest was during the Buchanan administration.

**Birkner:** If we could get the panelists briefly, to give us a one minute reassessment of Buchanan. Where do they see him? If they prefer not to express a personal opinion, I'd like them to tell us where they think Buchanan studies ought to be going. I would ask them each to be brief so that the audience could then have a shot. I thought we'd start with Professor Johannsen.

**Johannsen:** Well, one thing I would like to point out, one thing I would like to suggest here in addition to what I said already about knowing more about Buchanan, studying him further, is a new look at Buchanan during the secession crisis, and especially the January 8th [1861] message to Congress, which I find almost not mentioned at all in the books on Buchanan and in other studies of the secession crisis. And yet as I read that message, January 8, 1861, I was reminded of Abraham Lincoln's address on March 4, 1861, and I find Lincoln echoing the points that Buchanan made in that special message. And I hesitate to present this because people are going to jump all over me because of what I'm saying about Lincoln. But it seems to me that there is a linkage, and I wish I had time before coming here to look into this, to see to what extent Lincoln's newspaper in Springfield reported these things, made these points, and so forth. A great many northern people supported this message, supported Buchanan in these statements, including Dr. Stamp, in *When The War Came*. So I think here is a point that ought to be reached, that Buchanan's stiffening position with respect to the Union and his statements in the January 8th message in which he says "the right and duty of the federal government to use military force defensively against those who resist federal officers in the execution of their legal functions and against those who assail the property of the federal government is clear and undeniable." And that's italicized. He emphasizes that statement, and we find that echoed in Lincoln's inaugural. Well, Lincoln gets all the credit; we should give some credit to James Buchanan.

**Stamp:** Let me amplify that a bit, because that's what I wanted to talk about. Having given a rather negative assessment at the beginning, I would like to say that I absolutely agree with Professor Klein that his response to the secession crisis was altogether honorable and not only in his message of January 8th but in his regular message which was so much maligned in the public press. What he did in that message was to say exactly what Lincoln said. There is a difference between

enforcing the law and protecting American property and coercing a state, and Buchanan denied the right of the federal government to coerce a state, and so did Lincoln. But he also said that the government had the right to protect its property. He said further that the powers of the president, as then defined by federal law, were not adequate, and he threw it up to Congress to provide additional powers and the Congress never did, even after the South left the Union and resigned from Congress and the Republicans had a majority. In January and February, the Republicans did absolutely nothing to strengthen the power of the president. Lincoln, of course, had to go beyond the power of the president, that Buchanan was not willing to do. In his message of January 8th, he made the same point: he refused to recognize the right of a state to secede; he defended the right of the federal government to repel aggression against the federal government; he insisted that he had no intentions, and it was illegal, to coerce a state. It was a meaningless distinction, but Lincoln made it and so did Buchanan, and Buchanan left office without compromising Lincoln; the Confederacy had not been recognized. He had not launched a war, and he had every right to feel that this crisis belonged to Lincoln. It was awful that one had to wait four months for a new president to come in but, I think, Buchanan did what was the right thing for him to do during this period. Another place where he differs from Lincoln, of course, is that he kept advocating compromise and Lincoln did everything that he could do to prevent compromise. But as far as protecting the integrity of the Union, I think Buchanan's record is first-rate during the secession crisis.

**Johannsen:** Even Lincoln endorsed compromise. During his inaugural address, he said if you come up with an amendment in Congress to solve this problem, I'll support it.

**Stampp:** Well, that's not a compromise because no southerner said that was adequate. And Lincoln said that was the law anyway. If you want to call that a compromise.

**Fehrenbacher:** Two men could say approximately the same thing, but they've said it out of totally different backgrounds, and that's what made the difference. Lincoln said it out of an anti-slavery background and back of Buchanan was thirty years and more of pro-Southern, anti-anti-slavery service and actions, and the credibility of the two when they said these things—similar things—was, therefore, very different, at least, throughout the North.

**Stampp:** Can I make one point? And that is that Jefferson Davis said, "If Abraham Lincoln follows the policy of James Buchanan, we're going to have a civil war." So

Jefferson Davis saw no difference.

**Fehrenbacher:** But northerners remembered Buchanan for what he had been and that is why, I think, that much more needs to be done with investigating more thoroughly Buchanan's earlier history set against the background of what was going on during his more than twenty years in Congress in order to understand why he believed, and I think he sincerely believed, that the one major problem of his time, the one that was above all others, was that of preventing the breakup of the Union as a result of slavery agitation. And I think, that he acted on those terms until maybe right at the very end circumstances were going to force him depart them.

**Smith:** My primary criticism of Buchanan rests on the fact that the only way really you were going to prevent secession was to prevent the election of a Republican president, and so everything you did that created the wrong image or an anti-Democratic image, or an anti-southern image, and made it stronger in the North increased the possibility that a Republican candidate in 1860 would, as Lincoln did, get enough northern votes to win the presidency even though he had only forty percent of the total vote. Certainly, the Lecompton Constitution played a great role in causing a lot of Democrats to become Republicans, a lot of former Know-Nothings to become Republicans and, if the Lecompton Constitution had passed that would have been even greater. That's one man's opinion. I thoroughly agree with Professor Stamp about Buchanan's role in the [secession] crisis. He stood firm. He would not accept any southerners as delegates. He said, "you come here as private citizens." He made it clear that he would maintain control of the forts. His reputation has suffered a good deal because of the out-and-out falsehoods of General Winfield Scott. Buchanan wanted to reinforce Fort Sumter with the *U.S.S. Brooklyn* and Scott talked him out of it, so they sent the smaller, weak, unarmed ship that was driven away. Scott later implied that he was the one who wanted to send the *Brooklyn*, and Buchanan had talked him out of it. This is not true. Buchanan did stand firm. If he had given up Fort Sumter, Lincoln would not have had his cause for the war. Fort Sumter was still on the plate for Lincoln because Buchanan did stand firm in this crisis.

**Birkner:** Let's open the floor to questions now.

**Member of the Audience:** Would somebody comment, please, on Buchanan's views on Manifest Destiny.

**Stamp:** He was for it.

**Robert May:** I know I've already had my say, but in response to your mentioning

the black hole of Buchanan's presidency, it ties in with this, I think. Recently we've had several presidents in this country who we suggest are foreign policy presidents, that they had no domestic agenda, and I think that's a charge that's been raised against the incumbent. It seems to me, that with James Buchanan, a president who vetoes various kinds of internal development bills, and a president who essentially had a foreign policy agenda, who intended to be a foreign policy president with the idea of resolving the Utah problems, resolving the slavery in the territories problem, the Dred Scott decision, smack at the beginning of the presidency, would leave him free to follow a Manifest Destiny kind of agenda that he had set a long time earlier because, although he did not approve of the illegal expansion, i.e. filibustering, he definitely approved of buying Cuba, of a protectorate over Northern Mexico, and things like that. And also commercial expansion, which many scholars have pointed out, was a rising thing in the country, if you could arrange markets in Asia the whole country would prosper. So that I would throw that out as a possible interpretive handle for Buchanan's presidency. Slavery could go on forever with Cuba as its source. The South would always have a supply of slaves. As Professor Fehrenbacher and others have said, this is an anti-slavery president. He did not love the peculiar institution. From his biography you make it clear that he criticized slavery in the abstract but he certainly did not have an anti-slavery soul. I think, he would have tolerated a perpetuation of slavery indefinitely.

**Birkner:** George Templeton Strong's diary from the same period was obsessed with Buchanan's lack of backbone. People did talk about it. Would any of the panelists like to comment upon this?

**Smith:** Well, we always blame or credit the president with whatever happens. Most people do. He's our unifying factor; he's the one person who represents all of us and not just one state. If there's a depression, he's to blame. If there's prosperity, he gets the credit. Obviously, I think Buchanan had a big impact. I think when he said, regardless of the fact that he meant it just to be temporary, when he said that Kansas is as much a slave state as Georgia or South Carolina, it was tremendously important.

**Johannsen:** I would suggest that this is a period of time when the United States looked upon the presidency as a weaker branch of the government than the legislative branch. Since the Polk administration, perhaps, it's the Congress that exercised the leadership in the nation. This is off the top of my head but I think that's probably the case. You have a series of more or less passive presidents. This is



what makes the contrast with Lincoln, that was drawn the other day, so glaring because Lincoln harks back to the old Jacksonian concept. But this is a period of weak executives or at least of a perception that this is the way it ought to be—weak executives, strong legislative branch. . . .

**Member of the Audience:** What evidence do we have that Buchanan communicated directly with the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision?

**Fehrenbacher:** We have letters. . . . Justice [John] Catron is the one that he corresponded with first, and then Catron urged him to bring some pressure on Grier. He wrote to Grier and Grier replied. So we have that correspondence.

**Smith:** I'd like to say something quickly on this, whether it made any difference. I think if Buchanan and Douglas had liked each other, presented a united front, brought about a fair and honest election in Kansas, which would have gone Free-Soil, I don't think the Democratic party would have lost the South and, I think, they would have kept a lot of Democrats from going Republican in 1860. I think it could have made a big difference possibly. [Comment and question from the floor by William Gienapp not picked up by the tape.]

**Smith:** Again, I think, it's his emotional attachment to southerners. Now, Phil Klein says it's his emotional attachment to the Constitution and maybe it's a combination.

**Johannsen:** At the same time, we get awfully close here at times to a kind of devil thing with respect to the Civil War. I think you said somewhere yesterday, that Buchanan made the secession crisis, or the North-South crisis, insolvable. You said that was Buchanan's doing.

**Gienapp:** No, I didn't say that.

**Johannsen:** I wrote it down. Anyway, it's because of Buchanan that the Democratic party splits, and it's because of the Republicans win in 1860. We have people, apparently this is a kind of neo-revisionist point of view, "the Plundering Generation" and Buchanan was the chief blunderer who brings about the Civil War.

**Birkner:** We have time for two more questions and then we're going to have to pursue questions more informally. I think this gentleman here has been waving at me for a while.

**Member of the Audience:** I would like to ask these gentlemen, we may never get a chance to do this again, since they know Buchanan so well, to each give us a brief analysis of Buchanan's character.

**Birkner:** Well, I'll let them take a shot at it. . . .

**Stampp:** I'll use a few adjectives—cautious, conservative. He really disliked agita-

tors. He happened to focus on abolitionists, but, I think, he probably would have had the same feelings towards women's rights agitators, temperance agitators, and all the other agitators. He hated abolitionists; he hated Republicans. It was unrealistic, but he really did feel, as many Democrats did, and as they frequently virtually said, that the Republican Party was an illegitimate political organization because it was a standing threat to the survival of the Union and because it was a sectional party. He believed these things and, therefore, in his eyes, it was a perfectly legitimate agenda to stop sectional agitation. He felt, "What good does it do? It doesn't do any good for slaves or anyone." Moreover, Buchanan accepted southerners' assurances that the slaves are well cared for because it's in the interest of their masters and that they are being civilized and that we could only make things worse by agitating for the abolition of slavery. That's not exactly pro-slavery, but it comes awfully close to it.

**Smith:** I have a theory. He's a bachelor. He has an affectionate nature. He desperately needs affection. He doesn't want to be lonely. He doesn't like being lonely, and so when he goes to Washington, he takes up with the people who are also without their wives and kids there, and they give him affection and they win his affection. And, I think, there is this deep personal affection for a number of southerners, because they were the ones that he was put in with when he went to Washington. I think that has a big impact on the way he felt. I think our personal friendships and our personal relationships have a lot to do with our behavior.

**Stampp:** Well, there are some qualifications there. Some of them did bring their wives, and he loved their wives.

**Smith:** Well, that's true too. The ones that came with their wives were always trying to match him up with somebody.

**Fehrenbacher:** I think the adjective erratic should be added to cautious. He was basically cautious, prudent—but he could be rash and stubborn. And the rashness is indicated, I think, in the move into Utah before he had enough information to be really justified.

**Johannsen:** He was a very stiff, uncompromising individual once he made up his mind. A constitutionalist, devoted to the constitution. An individual who treasured law, order, and stability. . . .

**Fehrenbacher:** I believe, like all politicians of that time, he was a constitutionalist only when it was to his advantage to be that. I think you could overstress his clinging to the constitution. He, like most Democrats, refused to accept the ruling of John Marshall that a national bank was constitutional. And the Democratic Party

kept in its platform, right down through 1856, a statement that Congress had no power to incorporate a bank. And he was asked, "If you urge people to obey the Supreme Court with respect to the Dred Scott case, why did you take this stand against the Court's decision with regard to a bank?"

**Johannsen:** When I say constitutionalist, it's according to his interpretation always.

**Birkner:** I see a number of hands here, which would suggest that you haven't looked at your watches and noticed that we've been going for two hours. However, before we close, I see Philip Klein and I think we owe him an expression of gratitude for his pioneering work on Buchanan. [Warm Applause]