

ASSERTING HIS AUTHORITY:
JAMES BUCHANAN'S FAILED
VINDICATION"

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The book, like its author, was dignified, restrained and rather dull . . .

— Phillip Klein, *President James Buchanan* 419.

History has long since passed judgment on the fifteenth President, James A. Buchanan, who served from 1857–1861. Ulysses S. Grant claimed he never knew “the first Buchanan Democrat who *was* true & stood by his country in the hour of danger.” Woodrow Wilson wrote that Buchanan “was past the prime of life, had never possessed great courage or any notable gifts of initiative” and “was weak; and weakness was under the circumstances fatal.” Harry Truman ranked Buchanan among the bottom eight of his predecessors. Historians agree; in C-Span’s 2000 presidential survey, a panel of experts ranked Buchanan dead last, and a viewer poll concurred. Both historians and viewers ranked him last in crisis leadership, vision, pursuit of equal justice, and performance in historic context. He finished no higher than thirty-seventh in any category. Since 1948, when Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. conducted the first presidential survey, the polls have consistently rated Buchanan near the bottom, usually ahead of only Warren Harding. The C-Span poll was the first to rank him last.¹ But long before Grant, Wilson,

Truman, and the presidential surveys weighed in, Buchanan was one of the most despised men in America, a convenient scapegoat with the misfortune of occupying the Executive Mansion during the crucial months leading up to the Civil War. After his term, Buchanan was unwilling to sit idly by as his reputation sank. In 1866, he published an autobiography titled *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* that would only underscore the perception that he was the wrong man in office at the wrong time.

As the historian writing, or rewriting history, the disgraced politician tried to explain his own beliefs and actions. For Buchanan, the obvious ulterior motive of autobiography was to reshape national historical consciousness to improve the public's opinion of his administration. He coaxes his readers' confidence with a meticulously researched, extensively footnoted argument in his own favor. The memoir creates a Buchanan of print who is overconfident about his reasoning and rhetorical skill. He is cool and distant and relies on the ability of language, whether a Supreme Court decision or his own manuscript, to alter the beliefs and actions of the American populace. Though the nation's high emotions made reason and distance crucial to this effort, his concept of reason and distance prevented him from revealing his humanity to an audience torn by four years of war. The book's shortcomings ultimately come less from what Buchanan writes than what he omits: his failure to respond emotionally to the terrific loss of life for which he was blamed counteracted his impressive documentation.

I thank God I have lived to perform this duty.

—Letter to Nahum Capen, 25 November 1865

From almost the moment of his discharge from office in 1861, the former president began to seek public vindication. Philip Klein, Buchanan's most thorough biographer, paints the "Sage of Wheatland" as an author obsessed, setting out with vigor to take his own life. The record Buchanan compiled from government documents and memoranda was strengthened by "pester[ing] his friends for extracts of letters he did not have, or for confirmation of minor points, or copies of fugitive pamphlets and committee reports." Working exclusively from Wheatland, his estate in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Buchanan corresponded widely to request copies and texts of documents, reimbursing the expenses of his amateur investigators. But the response for the project was negative; even his friends believed that publishing

his defense during the war would cause backlash from the public and the Republican Congress.²

Knowing that his writing walked a fine line between rehabilitating and further discrediting his image, Buchanan worked quietly and methodically, waiting for the right opportunity for publication. By November 1861, he bragged that his assembled materials could create "not merely a good defense, but a triumphant vindication of my administration." But in January 1862 he insisted that he had no "intention of writing a history of my administration" although he had gathered a "reference . . . as would fully justify me." However, he denied any intention of seeking publication and repeated in March that, despite reports that he was working on a complete autobiography, he had only collected documents to justify his actions "which might be put in form at any moment."³ All he needed now was the right "moment."

He would have to wait until after the war. Much of the public blamed Buchanan for the conflict, and his apologia was likely to receive a hostile response. In 1865, Buchanan submitted his manuscript to the D.S. Appleton publishing house in New York.⁴ In September of that year, Buchanan declined an offer from his friend William Reed, a judge and historian, to write the preface, instead choosing to write it himself. Carefully constructed to try to avoid backlash, Buchanan's preface notes that while the "historical narrative" was "prepared soon after [the war's] outbreak," it "was delayed to avoid the possible imputation . . . that any portion of it was intended to embarrass Mr. Lincoln's administration." Lincoln's martyrdom was a major hurdle. Buchanan paid the late President due deference by explicitly crediting the delayed publication to the war and the assassination, though noting that the text had been originally written "substantially in the present form."⁵

But Appleton delayed the book's release, and by October 5, 1865, Buchanan's patience was wearing thin. He observed, "I believe my book will be published in the course of the present month. It has been delayed much longer than I desired or expected."⁶ He did not have to wait long. By November 25, he wrote, "You will have seen ere that my little book has been launched on a stormy ocean." Still, Buchanan remained confident that, though "severely criticized," it would survive because of the strength of its "facts and authorities cited."⁷ His confidence remained undiminished even when "[a] strong attempt" was made "to cry it down in New York." He concluded, "[I]t will make its own way."⁸ In January 1866 Appleton released *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* into the "stormy waters."

I advise you to take your own life . . . to prevent biographers from taking it in theirs.

—Letter from Henry Adams to Henry James, 73.

Buchanan the author faced a dual task: to write his own personal history and to write (or re-write) American history. *Buchanan's Administration* fell under what Jared Sparks called historical biography, or life and letters, in which personal history is constructed through access to "copious selections from letters and other original papers" that dealt with the subject's involvement in public affairs and historical events." A noted nineteenth-century American biographer, Sparks collapsed history and biography, a marked change from the Johnsonian approach that distinguished the two. The "authentic" and "authoritative" documents that Sparks believed crucial to proper biography were standard earmarks for nineteenth-century American biographers.⁹

Buchanan aimed squarely for this sort of text, referring to his book not as memoir but as "a historical narrative." It is composed of a combination of speech transcripts, news articles, correspondences, and a connective third-person prose, all of which combine to give little appearance of memoir or autobiography.¹⁰ Indeed, Buchanan proudly proclaims that he is "abstain[ing]" from using any "private correspondence" (vi). After all, Buchanan's goal was not to reveal his personal life but to defend his public actions. Klein notes that he "marshaled the evidence in orderly array, documented it from official records, and produced a powerful case."¹¹ The *Dictionary of American Biography* calls it "an unusually careful document."

As a swipe at critics who labeled him a traitor, Buchanan the author purposefully strengthens the ties between Buchanan the man and Buchanan the historical figure in an effort to exalt Buchanan the patriot. He moves early not only to establish himself as a true American but also to create a curious parallel between his life and the life of the nation. He notes that he drew "his first breath soon after the adoption of the Federal constitution and the Union it established" (iii). James Buchanan was born in 1791, ten years after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, four years after the Constitutional Convention, and the very year the Bill of Rights was adopted. The birth and first breath of the man are temporally linked to the birth and first breath of the nation. Buchanan's career as "an eye-witness of the blessed effects" of the Union makes him a fit historian of national as well as personal history, and his personal narrative is also a national narrative.

It is fitting also that four events followed closely between the years 1865 and 1868: the end of the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, the appearance of *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion*, and Buchanan's death in 1868. Though Buchanan asserts that "[h]e never doubted the successful event of the war, even during its most gloomy periods" (iii), his autobiography, the metaphorical taking of his own life first coined by Henry Adams, was substantially completed by 1862, at the height of the war when a confederate victory seemed a distinct possibility. The autobiographical "suicide act" could be read as a hari kiri, timed with the apparently imminent death and dissolution of the Union. As Grant observed, Buchanan not only did not act to save the Union's life but also believed that it could not act in its self-defense.¹² The Union, once in dire jeopardy despite Buchanan's revisionist braggadocio, survived the challenges and by 1865 had finally been preserved.

Now that the Union had been pulled back from the brink, Buchanan attempted to do the same by using his autobiography to restore his reputation—to use his textual suicide as a tool for his own regeneration. Unfortunately for him, the war's result had already been sealed in a President's blood; and Lincoln's transformation from hero to martyr dwarfed Buchanan's attempts at redemption. The Union survived Buchanan, who succumbed in 1868, three years after Appomattox and Ford's Theater, and only two years after the Thirteenth Amendment ended the peculiar institution Buchanan had once defended. Buchanan drew his final breath as the national near-death experience ended.

Despite his contemporaneity to the nation's history, Buchanan held resolutely to views that recent events had repudiated. Indeed, from the very beginning, the book leaves its reader wondering to what extent Buchanan comprehends the gravity of the late rebellion. He strikes an immediate tone of defiance with his opening line:

That the Constitution does not confer upon Congress power to interfere with slavery in the states, has been admitted by all parties and confirmed by all legal decisions ever since the origin of the Federal Government (9).

Though Buchanan is accurate, writing in 1862, his statement is an odd one to read after tens of thousands of men died for the right of Congress "to interfere with slavery in the states." In fact, the Thirteenth Amendment, which rendered Buchanan's argument forever moot, was ratified several weeks before

the book reached the public. The change to acknowledge slaves as human beings and American citizens was by far the most dramatic outcome of the war. Unlike his country, Buchanan refused to evolve. The war certainly weighed heavily on Buchanan, but with his opening statement, he regresses and defends positions fashionable before but meaningless after the war. This opening salvo was a public relations disaster waiting to happen in a book designed to improve its author's image. It taints his claim of analogy between his life and the nation's history.

Like Caesar and Napoleon, Buchanan used third-person narration—an odd choice for a figure lacking imperial stature.¹³ Although the use of third person narration is intended to create the appearance of an objective historian, it was a poor decision for a man accused of being a despot driving his own nation toward destruction. But it is understandable, considering the three roles Buchanan is performing: autobiographer, biographical subject, and historian. Instead of “I,” he employs “Buchanan,” the “President,” or “Mr. B.” The narration posits Buchanan as both observer and observed. Literary critic Susanna Egan observes that the third person allows authors to write “about themselves as if they were others, as if [they] were in a literal but nontechnical sense defaced, of interest only as figures of their times.” By positioning himself outside of himself, the autobiographer’s “purpose repeatedly is to record and thereby to create American history.”¹⁴ Even the title page obscured his authorship; the Appleton edition’s title page does not specify Buchanan as author, while that of the British Sampson and Low edition does so prominently.¹⁵ By thus obscuring his authorship, Buchanan can shift attention from himself to the facts of his case, allowing for the appearance of objectivity as he reconstructs the historical context of his administration.

An additional advantage to third person narration is distance, one of the style’s defining characteristics. Autobiography theorist Phillip Lejeune states that third-person puts the “distancing . . . out in front . . . to express an articulation (a tension) between identity and difference.” Buchanan’s goal is “to dissociate [him]self from the person” he was and pretend “to talk about [him]self as if [h]e were another person.” However, Lejeune assumes the use of a “title (or a preface) . . . to impose an autobiographical reading.”¹⁶ *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration* lacks even this basic mode of connecting author to text. The author’s name is not on the title page, and the preface is unsigned. Buchanan’s goal is complete dissociation, which allows him to step away from his past actions and separate Buchanan the controversial character from Buchanan the elder statesman narrator. Klein suggests that the book

"manifested the anxiety of the author, in common with everyone else of his day, to escape all appearance of agency in promoting the conflict."¹⁷ In control of his own text, Buchanan can easily shift blame on to everyone from abolitionists to slaveholders to the Republican Congress or to his own federal officers. The narrative style minimizes his own insertion into the narrative and allows other figures to take responsibility for the unpleasant events. Standing outside of his own history, Buchanan distances himself from the role of agency in that history. Under the guise of a restrained, unemotional recorder of fact, Buchanan expects his audience to be similarly reasonable, cool-minded thinkers.

Buchanan's general argument was simple: blame everyone and anyone else. In a tour de force of unabashed triangulation, he blamed the war on "the long, active, and persistent hostility of the Northern Abolitionists . . . against Southern slavery" and "the corresponding antagonism and violence" of "the advocates of slavery" (iv). Buchanan is thus the man in the middle, practically an innocent bystander. He moves well outside his personal narrative to present the history of discord from the Nullification Crisis of 1830 to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Not only were powerful interests at work, but also a quarter century of intensifying controversy awaited the winner of the 1856 election. The mess was not Buchanan's doing but a legacy of his predecessors. The final result was that "all [Buchanan's] efforts to avoid the Civil War would be frustrated by agencies far beyond his control" (v). True, the roots of the war ran too deep for one man or action to be held responsible; but it was also clear that Buchanan was not the man to meet the crisis.

Buchanan's attack places his opponents as opponents contrary to reason itself. Calling the abolitionists "misguided fanatics," later upgraded to "numerous and enthusiastic partisans," Buchanan found the origins of agitation in the New England pulpit (10). When he traces the growth of anti-slavery societies from Boston to New York to Philadelphia, he conveniently omits the history of those cities for producing freedom-obsessed zealots when the American colonists were the subjugated people (11). In a move that may hint why he was the "bachelor president," Buchanan tips his cap to the use of women in abolitionist societies. He marvels that as public speakers they managed "harangues . . . as violent and extreme as those of their fathers, husbands, and brothers" (10). Buchanan wants to set aside the emotionally charged rhetoric based on religion or gender in favor of the simple argument that slavery, "if sinful in itself" was a "domestic institution" under the control of the states. The sins of Georgia and Texas were not the sins of Pennsylvania or

Ohio. For Massachusetts's citizens to move for the abolition of slavery in South Carolina was as inappropriate as calling for abolition in Brazil (10). Cool reason would reveal that the responsibility for slavery lay exclusively in the laps of the states that practiced it.

Buchanan's assumption of a voice of reason against fanaticism is further linked to religious fervor in a rather uncomfortable passage. He advocates a hands-off policy toward slavery not only on states rights but also on religious grounds, leaving the sins of slavery to the "Supreme Governor of nations" instead of the "spirit of interference" which motivated abolitionists (64). Buchanan defends his inaction against slavery not just through his constitutional beliefs but also by his embrace of the "peace and charity" of Christianity, comparing the agitators' methods to Catholic-Protestant or Christian-Muslim warfare (65). Buchanan's conceptions come from a religion based on faith in a "superintending Providence which never acts rashly" and which could have eradicated slavery without endangering "the benign principles" (64-5). Reason and inactivity are not merely linked but part of an ordained plan. This reversal of the abolitionist religious fervor defends slavery with ease, if under the "humane treatment" advocated by scripture, and exposes Buchanan's naiveté. He cites the conquistador Cortez as a man of "perfect sincerity" who sought only to save the souls of the Aztecs (65). Buchanan's strategy throughout the book is to present a reasoned alternative to his enemies' positions in order to paint them as fanatics.

The reader must have confidence in Buchanan's trustworthiness as a historian to accept his explanations, and Buchanan actively courts that trust. When General Winfield Scott accused Buchanan of a lack of decisive action that allowed the cotton states' secession, Buchanan responded by claiming that Scott's report to President Lincoln "evidently proceeded from a defective memory prejudiced by a strong bias" (170). Buchanan questions the general's knowledge, which was based on recollection, and his motives. To strengthen his own case, Buchanan offers in contrast his own carefully researched text, with its ample outside verification, unlike Scott's style, which "rests mainly on vague and confused recollections of private conversations" that are "strictly confidential" and not subject to independent verification (170-1). Because Scott's evidence is inherently private and unavailable, the reader must take him at his word. Buchanan posits Scott as a model of an untrustworthy historian while convinced that the ready availability of external sources buttresses his own arguments because any willing soul can check them for distortion.

Curiously, the paragraph demolishing Scott for using private sources follows on the same page Buchanan's refutation of the charge that he prepared inadequate security for the 1861 inauguration, which was marred by death threats against Lincoln. Buchanan's argument ends with this statement:

It is due to President Lincoln to state, that throughout his long progress in the same carriage with the late President . . . he was far from evincing the slightest apprehension of danger (170).

Buchanan places himself precisely in Scott's predicament. Just as Scott needs Buchanan to confirm the events of their meetings because they were confidential, Buchanan needs Lincoln to confirm his own assertion that there was no danger of violence at the inauguration, because only he and Lincoln were riding in the carriage. He admits ("It is due") that he cannot verify the statement himself and that only the deceased Lincoln's testimony can make it believable. Buchanan is, after all, subject to shortcomings of memory, and his bias in recollecting the events is obvious (170-1). So, much like Scott, Buchanan occasionally expects his readers to take only his word, too.

The availability of independent verification further arises as an issue when Buchanan describes an exchange of letters with representatives from South Carolina on the eve of the Fort Sumter assault. Buchanan's flat refusal of the state commissioners' request to remove federal troops from the fort provoked a response "so violent," "confounded," and "disrespectful" that Buchanan returned it without reply (183). The "disrespectful" letter, which was of course extremely embarrassing to Buchanan, was "published at length in the 'Congressional Globe.'" His strong initial response was "never published in this so-called official register." Because of the record's selectiveness, the "offensive letter was scattered broadcast over the country" while Buchanan's letter "was buried in one of the . . . volumes of executive documents" (184).

Demonstrating the shortcomings of the "official record" is crucial to Buchanan's project, for he must not only write history but also rewrite the existing record that condemns him. Buchanan wants his readers to know that he stood up to the South Carolina commissioners, a stance that might counteract the accusations of weakness. But the letter incident also strengthens his case for the unreliability of the official record because it is an example of a part of the historical record that is misleading and in need of correction. His personal narrative allows the unprinted letter to enter the national transcript

because inclusion in Buchanan's personal narrative is also inclusion in the writing of national history.

Nevertheless, one fact of the historical record is certain: Buchanan's official strategy, however apparently reasonable, failed to prevent the Civil War. Similarly, his authorial strategy fails to mask a core problem: his denial of bloodshed. Not long after his portrayal of Northern Abolitionists as "misguided fanatics," Buchanan turns to the actions of the South. Heretofore "the assailed party . . . far more sinned against than sinning," the pro-slavery party took the aggressor's role by pressing the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 (28). Some historians claim the Civil War began in Kansas, not at Fort Sumter, when pro- and anti-slavery groups flooded the territory to take part in the referendum on slavery in the territory. Buchanan admits that "scenes of bloodshed . . . were enacted by both parties, disgraceful to the American character." But the generally long-winded, meticulous narrator concludes, "It is not our purpose to recapitulate these sad events" and begins a narrative about his own response to the allegations of voter fraud lodged by the anti-slavery forces in Kansas (29).

The recapitulation of events is a major component of Buchanan's narrative. In his opening chapter, he recounts the history of slavery agitation in America since 1789, much of which is irrelevant to the history of his administration. Why, in such a carefully researched book, omit much of the Bleeding Kansas conflict that was so pressing when he took office? The text does what Buchanan's policies could not: it contains the bloodshed in a tidy little paragraph, three sentences in five lines of text. This paragraph stands out because it is surrounded by lengthy paragraphs which deal with the congressional wrangling and underlying legal and constitutional issues. In place of the acts of war, Buchanan posits debate. Arguments about property rights, equality, and state sovereignty take the place of weapons and ammunition. The history of Bleeding Kansas that Buchanan wishes to write a history of Bleeding Kansas that takes place far from the killing grounds of Lawrence and Osawatimie in the safe, civil confines of Washington, where the worst obstacles are "extreme rancor and many threats" but "nothing more" (28).

President Buchanan's initial response to the crisis is indicative of his faith in the constitutional law. Upon entering office, "he indulged the hope that the anti-slavery party would abandon their hostility . . . and obey the laws." The pro-slavery Territorial government had been buttressed both by the Supreme Court and Congress. But Buchanan admits he was "destined to

disappointment" in "this reasonable hope" (30). His hope was anything but reasonable. Entire families had been slaughtered in Kansas, and Buchanan believed that the stroke of a pen could cause such bitter hurt and hatred to dissipate overnight. His hope was not only unreasonable but unrealistic. Given Buchanan's faith in his beloved Constitution, its failure to provide a peaceful resolution to the Kansas conflict must have been a disappointment. Unable to face the gory results of this failure of the American system of law, he corrects his failure to control and contain the violent agitation that led to the war. Autobiography provides the forum in which he exercises the complete control he never had as President. And his handling of the violence in the text is much like it was in office: brief, distant, and dismissive.

In the midst of his account of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Buchanan makes a strange comment: "It would be a waste of time to detail the history of this raid" (62-3). The comment comes near the middle of a lengthy paragraph that describes Brown's "career" as an agitator, then details the plot of the invasion even to the point of including the number and types of the raiders' weapons and the number and racial makeup of their party. Buchanan then recounts how the townspeople awoke to find Brown in control, and finally he recalls the capture, conviction, and execution of the raiders and lists the casualties of their lawlessness. Nowhere else does Buchanan consider details a "waste of time." In fact, the comment itself is a waste of time both to write and to read. The narrative is complete without it. The sentence only draws attention to itself and in turn to what Buchanan is declining to include. Buchanan is concealing the bloody details, substituting dry numbers and statistics, putting the number of rifles carried by the raiders at equal emphasis to the number of citizens killed.

Buchanan's omission does not completely disguise bloodshed, but perhaps the sentence can be of some use as a window into Buchanan's construction of history. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry is a major event of the administration, and as a historian Buchanan naturally feels he must mention it. But his tone of declaring the excluded material not only outside his purpose but a "waste of time" strongly asserts his authorial authority, his right to pick and choose what to include or exclude. Because he is writing personal as well as historical narrative, Buchanan uses his authorial authority to take command of his own life while still relying on history to provide framework for his story. With a tiny sentence, Buchanan asserts his personal ownership of his history at the same time that he defies the role of the traditional historian, who certainly would include what Buchanan excludes.

The most bizarre statement occurs in the penultimate chapter, summarizing the Buchanan administration's policy in foreign and domestic affairs unrelated to the war. He claims of the administration, "Both its domestic and foreign policy proved eminently successful" (231). Other than handing the Union over to Lincoln with six fewer states than had been handed to him, perhaps Buchanan could claim some success. But obviously, no matter the brilliance of Buchanan's Utah policy or his treatment of Paraguay, his policies are and should be judged on his handling of the one event that forever changed American history: the secession crisis. For Buchanan to think his readers would accept such a claim of success is a sign of pathetic overconfidence in his own reasoning, debating, and historical skills.

Buchanan wants not mercy but justification, and his book demands nothing less. In an overarching context of constitutional constraints and partisan politics, some sense might be made of Buchanan's policies. But to a nation still stinging from the decimation of its lower half and the loss of so many lives, Buchanan's reasoned approach resembled a lack of concern. The nation needed healing, not argument, and an emotional appeal might have allowed Buchanan to "share their pain" and join the mourning. Perhaps had he exhibited humility and sadness, he could have gained acceptance, but his dry, logical approach did not wear well. Like so many of his decisions, it was simply the wrong approach at the wrong time.

Buchanan's belief in rational argument is both his greatest strength and fatal flaw. But perhaps the most compelling "evidence" in his favor is the one small sequence in which the author becomes almost fully human. The possibility and consequences of a civil war weighed heavily on the President. If author Buchanan conceals bloodshed, then President Buchanan was all too aware of it. He knew the enormous stakes: a "long and bloody war," "immense sacrifice of kindred blood," "enormous debt" compensated by "oppressive taxation," and the destruction of "commercial, manufacturing, artisan, and laboring classes" (112-3). When Buchanan acknowledges the horrific results of the war and shows his human side, he becomes almost a pitiable figure. He is not overstating the case when he observes, "No public man was ever placed in a more trying and responsible position" (109). He was one man facing an impossible task, to choose between the appeasement of allowing secession or the violence of preventing it. His acute awareness of the war's devastation is far more compelling than his attempts to shift the focus away from it. By throwing himself on the mercy of the audience, taking responsibility for his mistakes and asking who among them could have done

better under the circumstances, Buchanan might have obtained a measure of public sympathy. Yet he never makes a direct plea for understanding and seldom presents himself as a human being instead of a figure from the past. He reins in his emotions quickly, and the "immense sacrifice of kindred blood" is again an implicit footnote to the text.

I thank you for the offer to send me {the} review, but I do not wish to have it. If there is anything disagreeable in it, as is doubtless the case, some person will be sure to send it to me.

—Letter to John Blake, 19 January 1866 (*italics original*)

The *New York Times* opened the critical attacks on the memoirs with a severe personal assault in the December 1, 1865 issue. Calling Buchanan a "self-apologist for his own imbecile and disastrous administration," the *Times* suggested that his "profound silence" would have been more appropriate to "[g]ood taste" and "the best service he could possibly have rendered to his own blighted fame." The editors suggested that Buchanan should have allowed his enemies to tell his story and then "appealed for forgiveness or forbearance from his outraged but humane countrymen." The article continues with a lengthy personal attack that includes accusations and unfavorable comparisons to other presidents. It even claims that Buchanan hoped to assure his place in history as the last President of the United States by allowing the Union—and with it, the office—to dissolve. Brushing aside Buchanan's claims of being the victim of bitter partisanship, the *Times* accuses him of "deliberately betray[ing] the constitution of his country into the hands of its enemies" and violating his oath of office.¹⁸ The "stormy waters" had begun churning even before the book reached the public.

Still, Buchanan claimed that interest in the book was strong. In mid-January 1866, just two weeks after the release, Buchanan reported, "Several thousands have already been sold, & the Appletons inform me the demand is still increasing." Horatio King, Buchanan's future biographer, bought the book "as soon as it was offered here for sale" and "read it with great pleasure." In a massive overstatement, he called the "chapters on the occurrences in the closing months of your Administration . . . thrillingly interesting." After passing along the approval of former Secretary of War Joseph Holt, he claimed to have lent his copy out "to one and another ever since I read it myself." Perhaps out of respect for the book's "very high price", Buchanan

cheerfully sent a second copy to replace the much-lent one. Several friends received free copies from Mr. B, but the well eventually ran dry. By April 1867 Buchanan ruefully wrote to R.B. Rhett, a South Carolinian colleague from Buchanan's Congressional career¹⁹, that he would happily forward a copy "had I any copies on hand." The author's pride knew no bounds. "[I]t is an honest book . . . no fact therein has been specifically contradicted."²⁰

The January 1866 issue of *The New Englander* magazine saw the book differently. The reviewer called the book "[s]mooth, specious, apparently logical" before attacking it. Listing Buchanan's apologies, including lack of congressional support and lack of troops, the reviewer concluded sarcastically, "[T]his is no joke, nor series of jokes, but serious argument." He dismissed Buchanan's entire case because it omitted "the fundamental and comprehensive" fact that the Democratic Party's southern sympathies interfered with the protection of national interests. Concluding somehow that the book is an "appeal to our charity," the reviewer dismisses it as an "argument [which] disingenuously suppresses the truth" written by a "man whose connivance with evil precipitated the rebellion." Interestingly, *The New Englander* does not criticize Buchanan for breaking his silence, admitting that "no other human being is capable of writing such a production."²¹ This is hardly a compliment.

The Nation was no kinder, paradoxically calling *Buchanan's Administration* "an ingenious autobiography" of "imbecility." Critical of Buchanan's defense of the Supreme Court's infamous *Dred Scott* decision, his support for the pro-slavery Lecompton constitution of Kansas, and his faith in the Compromise of 1850, the reviewer asserts that Buchanan's desperation to become a peacemaker made him "bound by an unwarranted armistice" with the secessionists in South Carolina. As in the other reviews, trashing the book is almost if not outright secondary to trashing the author. Buchanan was called a "tool" of secession and accused of "compromise in self-defense." The reviewer concluded that if *Buchanan's Administration* becomes "his last intrusion upon public notice, he has written for himself an epitaph under which few men would care to lie."²² And if the book is indeed an "epitaph," a final statement, or "Buchanan's Testament" as the *Nation* review calls it, one can easily conclude that the reclamation project fell flat.

Buchanan also very much wanted to reveal his inner, private life. He formed an agreement with an author named James Shunk to write an "anecdotal biography" designed to present the ex-President as a complete human being and not just a government officer. Both Shunk and his wife moved into

Wheatland and spent several months taking notes, drawing on Buchanan's papers and memories. After leaving Wheatland, Shunk began to write the manuscript, but, despite Buchanan's investment, the book was never completed. In 1867, Buchanan turned to his friend William Reed, whom he paid a straight fee to recover Shunk's notes and to complete the book. Although Shunk apparently completed a portion of the work, a trip by Reed to Philadelphia to collect the notes came up empty. Even today Shunk's notes are absent from the Buchanan papers. Buchanan knew Reed to be a notorious procrastinator, so he made a separate agreement with Mrs. Reed, which would pay her five thousand dollars at the manuscript's completion. He hoped she would nag her husband to finish it faster. This effort ultimately failed. In 1867, Buchanan wrote to his niece that Reed's writing had faltered "on account of his wife's death [and] professional engagements."²³ Buchanan never saw his hopes fulfilled; the first complete biography based on his papers did not appear until 1883, well after his death.²⁴

Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion is, to put it mildly, a text resistant to literary criticism. It is dry and straightforward, using the authority of other documents to recreate its subject rather than opening Buchanan up as a human being, although in brief glimpses Buchanan reveals himself. Buchanan is trying to invert the traditional form of autobiography, which focuses inward, and instead constructs a historical context outside of himself. He relies on history and reason, detaching himself as author from his former self as President to appeal to cool-headed readers who would appreciate his argument. This approach failed miserably.

Still, the value of the book is not just as character rehabilitation or a strongly documented record or a forgotten work to be rediscovered. Only forty-one men have ever held James Buchanan's high office, and less than half have taken their lives into their own hands, creating a hybrid of national and personal history unique only to them. All presidential life-writing is therefore special in some way, even the final testament of a failure. Only in his memoirs can Buchanan, not the reviewers or historians, have the last word. The final words of Buchanan's book are also the final words of his final address as President, delivered on January 8, 1861, and included in complete form as the last Appendix. Let them be the last words here, too:

I feel that my duty has been faithfully, though it may be imperfectly, performed; and whatever the result may be, I shall carry to my grave the consciousness that I at least meant well for my country (296).

NOTES

1. The C-Span poll also marked new lows for Andrew Johnson (fortieth) and Franklin Pierce (thirty-ninth). Viewers additionally ranked Buchanan last in public persuasion. His highest ranking was in the historians' poll under "administrative skills." Complete information on both polls is available online at www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians/overall.asp and www.americanpresidents.org/survey/viewer/overall.asp. Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Calendar Entry for 26 March 1869, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995), 398; and Woodrow Wilson, Essay on States Rights dated 11 October 1899, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 338. Truman's opinion and historical survey information from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Rating the Presidents: From Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1996), 181-2, 189.
2. Philip Klein, *President James Buchanan* (University Park: Pennsylvania State U P, 1962), 417.
3. James Buchanan to Horatio King, 12 November 1861, *The Works of James Buchanan*, ed. John Bassett Moore, Vol. 11 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1911), 227. Buchanan to Harriet Lane, 16 January 1862, *The Works of James Buchanan*, 247. Buchanan to Isaac Toucey, 19 March 1862, *The Works of James Buchanan*, 262. These and all subsequent correspondences to and from Buchanan may be found in this same volume.
4. Klein, 418. Appleton would establish itself as a leader of publishing Civil War memoirs, contracting William Seward to write a book, publishing Joseph Johnston's *War Narratives*, and striking a huge commercial success with William Tecumseh Sherman's diaries. John Tebbel, *The History of Book Publishing in the United States*, Vol. 2 (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1975), 205.
5. Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* (New York: D.S. Appleton Publishing, 1866), iii. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Buchanan's memoir will be referenced by parenthetical notation.
6. Buchanan to Horatio King, 5 October 1865, *The Works of James Buchanan*, 401.
7. Buchanan to Nahum Capen, 25 November 1865, *The Works of James Buchanan*, 408.
8. Buchanan to Harriet Lane, 30 November 1865, *The Works of James Buchanan*, 408.
9. Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 140-1.
10. Entry about James Buchanan, *The Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 214.
11. Klein, 419.
12. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, (1885; reprint, New York: World Publishing Co., 1952), 114. In the same volume, Grant confesses to having voted for Buchanan for president in 1856.
13. Third person was not, however, an unheard-of devise. James Monroe also employed third person narration in his autobiography published well after his death. Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, used traditional first person in his.
14. Susanna Egan, "Self-Conscious History: American Autobiography after the Civil War" in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, Paul John Eakin ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 73.

15. Of course, considering Buchanan's history of cordial relations with Victorian England, he probably could have expected a warmer reception there than at home.
16. Phillip Lejeune. "Autobiography in the Third Person" in *On Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin, ed. trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 36, 42.
17. Klein, 419.
18. "Mr. Buchanan and His Book," *New York Times*, 1 December 1865, 4.
19. After Rhett was appointed to complete John C. Calhoun's term, he served briefly in the Senate with Buchanan. A notorious secessionist, Rhett advised then-President Buchanan not to oppose South Carolina's secession with force else "it will be bloody." Rhett to Buchanan, 24 November 1860, p. 5. Letter found in *The Works of James Buchanan* (see note 3).
20. Buchanan to John Blake, 19 January 1866, 412. Horatio King to James Buchanan, 12 April 1866, 414. Buchanan to Horatio King, 21 April 1866, 416.. Buchanan to R.B. Rhett, 8 April 1867, p. 443. All references are from *The Works of James Buchanan* (see note 3)
21. Review of *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion*, *The New Englander*, 25 (January 1866), 170-2.
22. "Buchanan's Testament," *The Nation*, 1, 7 December 1865, 723-4.
23. One of Reed's "professional engagements" was assisting the defense at Jefferson Davis's treason trial. Buchanan to Col. Joseph Butler, 31 October 1867, 451. Letter found in *The Works of James Buchanan* (see note 3).
24. Klein, 419. Buchanan to James Buchanan Henry, 23 September 1867, 450. Buchanan to Mrs. Henry Johnston (Harriet Lane), 9 December 1867, 457. Letters found in *The Works of James Buchanan* (see note 3).