

REVIEW ESSAY

LOOKING UP FROM THE BASEMENT: NEW BIOGRAPHIES OF FRANKLIN PIERCE AND JAMES BUCHANAN

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Baker, Jean H. *James Buchanan* (New York: Henry Holt and Company [Times Books], 2004. Pp. xviii, selected bibliography, index.)

Wallner, Peter A. *Franklin Pierce: New Hampshire's Favorite Son* (Concord, NH: Plaidswede Publishing, 2004. Pp. xvi, 321. Bibliography, index.)

Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan inhabit a distinctive place in American presidential historiography. Along with Millard Fillmore and Ulysses Grant, they are usually held up as anti-models when discussions turn to presidential greatness. But each has rated more dismissive commentary than serious study, a point highlighted by the publication of these new biographies.

Pierce and Buchanan were well credentialed for the presidency and won decisively in their bids for the nation's highest office. Pierce, in 1852, enjoyed a landslide over his hapless Whig opponent, Winfield Scott. Buchanan had a tougher run but still

emerged from the 1856 election with a handsome Electoral College majority. Each man intended to sustain the Democratic Party's dominance, which meant keeping sectional agitation over slavery in check. Both, nevertheless, spectacularly disrupted the Democracy—Pierce through his support for Stephen Douglas's bill repealing the Missouri Compromise, Buchanan with his attempt to steamroll the admission of Kansas into the Union under a pro-slavery constitution. Because the signature acts of these two presidents had unanticipated—indeed, disastrous—consequences, for party and country, history has treated each of them roughly. They have been relegated to the basement of presidential rankings, with no likelihood of the kind of improved reputation that Dwight D. Eisenhower has enjoyed over the past two decades.¹

A survey of the literature on presidents suggests that Pierce and Buchanan are not even seen as worthy of serious first hand study. Even military "losers" like George McClellan, Braxton Bragg, and Joseph Hooker received more attention. Until Peter Wallner published *Franklin Pierce: New Hampshire's Favorite Son* in 2004, no substantial biography of Pierce had appeared for more than seventy years.² Philip S. Klein's sympathetic biography, published in 1962, was the only study of Buchanan to appear since 1883, and none have appeared since, until the 2004 publication of Jean Baker's slender study, which is a part of a Times Books series on American presidents.³

Each of these new books fills a niche, but they are very different in approach. Wallner's study rambles through Pierce's life from birth through his inauguration as President in 1853 (the author is currently at work on volume two). He walks readers through significant episodes in New Hampshire legislative history, recounts political developments at the state and national level in which Pierce was a player, discusses Pierce's marriage to the well-connected but consistently sickly and increasingly morbid Jane Appleton, and recounts his role in the Mexican War. Wallner's Pierce is a vivacious personality whose company people enjoyed. Until he gave up drinking in 1842 (at least temporarily), he was a boon barroom companion. Pierce could be tough when needed, especially when the issue related to slavery, but generally maintained friendly personal relations with political adversaries. Wallner discusses Pierce's creditable service in the Mexican War and shows that he accomplished more than falling off his horse at a critical moment. He details the circumstances behind Pierce's nomination for, and election to, the presidency in 1852, which helps readers understand why he was the most "available" (that is, electable) Democrat, and why he handily defeated Winfield Scott. Wallner's discussion of the tragic aftermath of the election, highlighted

by the death, practically in front of Pierce's eyes, of his ten-year-old son Bennie, in January 1853, is lucid and affecting.

Raised in Hillsboro, his tavern-keeping, politician father, "Frank," significantly influenced Pierce. A talented and kindly person, and something of a prodigy, Pierce had the respect of his peers throughout his rise to national prominence. He was first elected to the state legislature by age 23, rising to Speaker of the House by age 26. He was elected to Congress as a fervent Jacksonian Democrat before the age of thirty, and entered the U.S. Senate before reaching forty. All the while Pierce dominated the Democracy in New Hampshire at a time when other formidable figures—notably Isaac Hill, Levi Woodbury, and John P. Hale—also were active and ambitious. Though Pierce's sympathies were initially with the party's radicals, who were hostile to corporations generally and railroads in particular, he gradually moved toward the party's ideological center and served as a conciliating force until slavery and its expansion factored more centrally into public debates.

Like Levi Woodbury, and his fellow Senator James Buchanan, Pierce was uncomfortable discussing slavery and avoided the subject as much as possible. In contrast, the party leadership's "see no evil" position increasingly estranged his fellow Jacksonian, John P. Hale. Pierce, like Pennsylvanian Buchanan, embraced a modified version of the gag rule, which made it impossible for the Senate to debate anti-slavery petitions. Hale could not do so, on free speech grounds; nor could he accept the expansion of slavery. Though Pierce professed slavery a "moral evil," he considered the maintenance of the Constitution and the Union a higher consideration than checking slavery's expansion. While slavery did not stir his soul, Pierce could and did get highly exercised over the activities of abolitionists. Theirs was the devil's work, in Pierce's view, because slavery was constitutionally sacrosanct and hence untouchable. Consequently, as Hale and the Free-Soilers assailed slavery and sought ways to hamstring the "slave power," by supporting, for example, the Wilmot Proviso, Pierce attacked the "evil" of "single issue" political activists. According to Wallner, "Pierce resented holier-than-thou abolitionists telling him he was a sinner." He believed that emancipation of the nation's large slave population "was not practical, possible, or constitutional, regardless of the moral issue involved." (p. 67)

In his hostility to Free-Soilers and abolitionists, Pierce occupied the same ground as Buchanan. Like Pierce, Buchanan would say (in northern company) that slavery was a moral evil. One looks in vain, nevertheless, through either man's career to find any concern about the well-being of slaves—or for that

matter, the white working people in the North who feared that slavery's expansion in the West would undermine their ability to prosper.

Though Wallner cautions his readers that Pierce's views on slavery and related issues might not be "worthy of praise today," he claims that they were at least "understandable" (p. 67). He has little to say, however, about Pierce's increasingly strident defense of every major initiative southern politicians' proposed to defend their peculiar institution, or his increasingly virulent racism. By the 1850s, Pierce's position on slavery and "free soil" was virtually indistinguishable from that of Jefferson Davis.

In portraying Pierce as a man of principle who favored Union over single-issue agitation, Wallner implies that Pierce represented reason against fanaticism and intolerance. This analysis creates a dichotomy that seems forced and unrealistic. Was Pierce forced to choose between moralistic antislavery and constitutionalism that supported slavery? Such a perspective ignores a substantial constituency among northerners who opposed slavery not as evangelicals but as Jacksonian Democrats. As Jonathan Earle has demonstrated, antislavery Jacksonians, an important and growing constituency throughout the North in the 1840s, backed the Wilmot Proviso and Free Soil candidates for president, and spoke against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. They were angry about slavery, and viewed it as bad for both the country and their own individual fortunes. Ultimately, this wing of the party cast its lot with the nascent Republican Party to protest the Democracy's domination by doughface leaders like Pierce and Buchanan.⁴

If Pierce's "doughface" views emerged out of political opportunism and constitutional conservatism, Buchanan's—according to Jean Baker—flowed from an abiding pro-southern orientation. In Washington, Buchanan associated most comfortably with southern Congressmen, lived in close companionship for many years with Alabama Senator William R. King, and joined Pierce in condemning "agitation" on the slavery question.⁵ Throughout their years in public life, Pierce and Buchanan fought on the same side of sectional questions, including the gag rule debates of the late 1830s, the admission of Texas into the Union, the Wilmot Proviso that would prevent the accession of new slave states in the Mexican Cession, and the Fugitive Slave Law, enacted as part of the 1850 Compromise that sought to save the Union in face of southern states' secessionist threats. Both men fiercely opposed the Proviso, but backed the Compromise of 1850 and its fugitive slave provision. Both of them actively enforced the fugitive slave law. In December 1860, Buchanan went so far as to suggest that if the North did not cease defying the law, it

would be "impossible for any human power to save the Union." Later, in his annual message, Buchanan proposed amending the constitution to affirm the validity of the Fugitive Slave Act.⁶

That neither Pierce nor Buchanan changed their stripes on sectional questions while president is not surprising. Although Pierce had qualms about Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854, in the end he helped ram it through the Congress. As Nicole Etcheson demonstrates in her recent book on Kansas in the 1850s, he also pursued a strongly pro-southern approach in the organization of the Kansas Territory.⁷ For his part, Buchanan was oblivious to the political harm he inflicted on his beloved Democratic Party in 1857 when he insisted on the admission of Kansas into the Union based on the proslavery Lecompton Constitution, a document that only pretended to reflect the will of a majority of Kansans.

Although Pierce and Buchanan were cut out of the same political cloth, their latest biographers are not. Wallner throws bouquets at his subject; Baker lobbs hand grenades. Had Baker's *Buchanan* been a large-scale biography one might be tempted to call it pathography, along the lines of Robert Caro's first two volumes of his Lyndon Johnson biography. As it is, the pathography relates primarily to Buchanan's presidency, which Baker posits as not merely as disastrous but near treasonous.

Baker calls attention to Buchanan's rotund physique, distinctive eye condition (wherein he seemed to be looking in two directions at once), and, because he never married, his alleged inability to compromise. She infers on the basis of admittedly minimal evidence that he was homosexual, and implies that Buchanan's sexual orientation had something to do with his pro-southernism. Baker concedes that Buchanan was sufficiently experienced and intelligent to serve as president, but makes that point to contrast Buchanan's credentials with what she sees as an egregious performance in office.

Baker is hardly out on a limb in judging Buchanan a failure in the White House. Such distinguished historians as Henry Steele Commager and James McPherson have called him the nation's worst president ever.⁸ "Presidential Greatness" surveys consistently place Buchanan at or toward the bottom rung.⁹ Further, Baker's arguments that Buchanan leaned too heavily on southern advisers and that he destroyed Democratic Party unity with his policy on Kansas, are mainstream.¹⁰ Whether Buchanan left the White House "in disgrace" (p. 2) is not so clear. Certainly Buchanan felt he had performed creditably in the White House and many Democrats, North and South, felt the same. Even historians who censure his leading policies on sectional issues

concede he was honest, hard working, and, in managing foreign affairs, competent if not always successful.¹¹ "Disgrace" seems hyperbolic as a judgment on his presidency.

Typically, historians consider presidents who they rate poorly as weak. That has remained the standard assessment of Pierce, for example, and typically of Buchanan as well. Baker will have none of this. In her discussion of Buchanan, she finds not a weak president, but rather a "strong, if exceptionally misguided one" (p. 78). In choosing his cabinet and pursuing his policies, Buchanan was, in Baker's estimation, consistently and militantly pro-southern. The fact that Buchanan refused to acknowledge this, during his presidency or thereafter, is, to Baker's view, obtuse.¹²

Baker's argument has merit. But if Pennsylvania's only president was not the underappreciated conciliator depicted by Philip S. Klein some four decades ago, was he so consistently feckless and pro-southern as Baker posits? While a clear thesis is an asset, it is only as good as its connection to the historical evidence. The evidence about Buchanan's presidency is less clear-cut than Baker would make it out to be.

For example, during the 1850s both Pierce and Buchanan faced filibusters in Latin America—efforts by adventurers, often backed by southern connections and money, to gain control and establish slave beachheads there. As Robert May shows in a recent monograph on the subject, both Pierce and Buchanan—particularly Buchanan—consistently sought to stymie filibustering and bring lawbreakers to justice.¹³ Buchanan's rigid constitutionalism led him to positions on slavery that clearly were out of touch with the currents of his times; but that he would enforce the law against slave interests when he saw it in his constitutional authority to do so is clearly evidenced in the case of filibusters. During the troubles in Utah between the Mormons and the federal authority, moreover, Buchanan was prepared to use force to assure federal supremacy. That he chose to listen to voices seeking compromise and that he brought the crisis to a close without major violence was a significant accomplishment.¹⁴

Then there is the question of the Secession Crisis itself, on which Baker devotes considerable attention and makes a credible argument that Buchanan let his country down. Buchanan, in Baker's informed, albeit caustic, treatment, failed to use the instruments of his office to hold federal forts in Charleston harbor, isolate South Carolina, and the cool hotheads bent on secession. That the crisis of 1860–61 extended far beyond South Carolina, she mentions only in passing. She further fails to consider that a more aggressive

policy could well have sparked war sooner and left incoming President Abraham Lincoln with fewer options. Baker rejects, without citing names, the arguments of such leading historians as Philip S. Klein, Kenneth M. Stampp, and Robert Johannsen who contend that, fundamentally, Buchanan and Lincoln followed the same policies during the Secession Crisis.¹⁵ For Baker, the point does not matter, since Buchanan's behavior, in her judgment, encouraged the South in its madcap course, leaving Lincoln to deal with a larger, rather than a smaller crisis. Though this may be true, it is at least plausible to argue, as Klein and others have done, that whatever Buchanan's failings, he left Lincoln with cards to play he might not have had if Buchanan attempted a Jacksonian response to the secessionists.¹⁶

Having said this, mainly to suggest that Baker's approach to her subject seems at points more like that of a prosecutor than a historian, several of her key arguments hit the mark. Can any serious scholar doubt that Buchanan exacerbated the sectional conflict which he claimed he intended to alleviate, or that he was out of touch with northern public opinion, and too much attuned emotionally to southern political friends and an idealized southern social system? Fast-paced and hard hitting, *James Buchanan* could hardly be different from Wallner's more rambling narrative, which in its "revisionism" cuts its subject every possible break.

Each of these biographies offers useful information and perspectives. Each is to be welcomed onto the groaning shelf of Civil War era histories. Neither book—one overly kind to its subject, the other resolutely critical—captures fully the complexities of character, the choices made and unmade in what were significant, indeed, emblematic political careers. As Jean Baker rightly observes, history students can gain insight not just by studying examples of presidential greatness, but also by looking up from the bottom, by considering the presidents who did not measure up. We need more biographies and specialized studies of each of these less than stellar figures—sooner rather than later.

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NOTES

1. Among many surveys, see especially Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents, Washington through Carter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Rating the Presidents: From Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly* 112 (1996): 181–189. Eisenhower was ranked 22nd out of 34 presidents in the original Arthur Schlesinger Jr. poll of historians in 1962. Most presidential polls of the past decade have placed Eisenhower just in or outside the top ten presidents, out of 43.
2. Roy F. Nichols, *Franklin Pierce* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931; revised edition 1969), has long been considered the standard work on Pierce.
3. George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883); Philip S. Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962).
4. See Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
5. Baker, *Buchanan*, esp. pp. 33, 81–83. Buchanan's contemporary, George Washington Julian, observed that the antislavery movement had "no meaning" to Buchanan except as a target for abuse, because "the Democracy he believed in had no foundation in the sacredness of human rights." George Washington Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840–1872* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press Reprint, 1970), p. 193. For Buchanan's suggestion that it was as unreasonable for a territorial legislature to forbid slavery as it would be for it to forbid the mining of coal, see James B. Ranck, "The Attitude of James Buchanan Towards Slavery," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 51 (1927): 126.
6. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 247.
7. Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).
8. Commager made his observation in a garbled passage in an article he wrote for *The New Republic*, (6 July 1968), p. 18. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. repeated it in an essay review of John Updike's *Buchanan Dying* for the *Atlantic Monthly* 233 (June 1974): 54. McPherson's comment was in an interview with *USA Today*. See "Historian Has Field Day With Presidents," February 15, 2005.
9. In addition to the Schlesinger Poll and a periodic survey conducted by Professors at Siena College in upstate New York, a C-Span poll of historians in 2000 ranked Buchanan dead last.
10. See, for example, Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).
11. For a trenchant and balanced assessment of Buchanan's foreign policy as president, see Frederick Moore Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), chapters 8, 9.
12. In this assessment of Buchanan as forceful and pro-southern, Baker is not treading fresh ground. This is the central thesis of Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975). Smith's book is probably the most persuasive single account of Buchanan in the

REVIEW ESSAY

White House. It has not been especially influential in presidential historiography, however, except insofar as it has reinforced the perception that Buchanan did not measure up as president.

13. See Robert S. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. pp. 121–126, 160–161, 218, 269, 341 n. 17. In addition to confronting filibusters, Buchanan's aggressively expansionist foreign policy included support for trade with Japan, an Open Door in China, and efforts to expand the nation's domain through the acquisition of Cuba. For a trenchant and balanced assessment of Buchanan's foreign policy as president, see also Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire*, chapters 8, 9.
14. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, pp. 315–317; Smith, *Presidency of James Buchanan*, pp. 65–68.
15. On the complex dynamics of the secession crisis, there is an enormous literature. A good starting point is Maury Klein, *Days of Defiance: Sumter, Secession, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). For the comments of Stampf and Johannsen, respectively, see "The Presidency of James Buchanan: A Reassessment," in Michael J. Birkner, ed., *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 194–196. Philip S. Klein makes a similar argument in his Buchanan biography and in his 1978 Fortenbaugh Lecture at Gettysburg College. On the latter, see "Says Buchanan, Lincoln Sought to Prevent War," *Gettysburg Times*, November 20, 1978, pp. 1, 8.
16. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, chapters 27–29.