

## DIPLOMATIC FAILURE: JAMES BUCHANAN'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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Everyone knows that 2009 marked the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Also common knowledge is the fact that Lincoln consistently ranks first among scholars, pundits, and members of the general population when it comes to US presidents. His two inaugural addresses, meanwhile, are rated among the best in American history. Indeed, the text of the second inaugural address adorns the north wall of the Lincoln Memorial. Nothing similar can be said about Lincoln's predecessor, James Buchanan, however. Buchanan is usually placed at the very bottom of the list of presidents, and his inaugural address is widely regarded as one of the least effectual of all those delivered by the nation's chief executives.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Lincoln's speeches have rightly received much attention from scholars, relatively little attention has been paid to the address delivered by Buchanan that cold yet sunny day in March, 1857. Buchanan's most sympathetic modern biographer devotes barely two lines to it.<sup>2</sup> Even those writing in the late nineteenth century who attempted to explain and justify the many failures of Buchanan's tempestuous four years in office had little to say

about his speech.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for such oversights appear to be obvious: Buchanan was no Lincoln to be sure; the fruits of secession, civil war, followed in Buchanan's wake; Buchanan never had a reputation as a keen wordsmith or as an accomplished public speaker; the inaugural address itself appears insignificant given the events of 1857–61, let alone 1861–65; Buchanan was almost universally reviled at the time of his death in 1868. Like the man and his term in office, the fifteenth president's inaugural address has for the most part been consigned to the relics of history.

In the 1990s, however, a group of eminent antebellum historians declared that much more work needed to be done on Buchanan and his presidency. History's verdict on Buchanan, they said, cannot merely be that he was the antithesis of Lincoln. They suggested a number of questions on Buchanan that remained to be answered including "How did he define his presidential role?" and "What was his concept, his view, of the power of the presidency?"<sup>4</sup> In addition, there are other recurring questions concerning the Buchanan presidency such as "Why did Buchanan assemble such a weak cabinet?"; "What were his real views of the institution of slavery?"; "And how could he have believed that the Supreme Court through the Dred Scott decision would provide a definitive settlement to the slavery issue?" All these questions remain, with nothing having come along to surpass Philip Klein's analysis of Buchanan written nearly a half a century ago.<sup>5</sup>

This article suggests that an examination of the content and background of Buchanan's inaugural address goes a long way towards answering these lingering questions. The speech demonstrates conclusively that James Buchanan was first and foremost a diplomat. As such, he was both unprepared and temperamentally incapable of providing the kind of strong presidential leadership that the nation so desperately needed at this critical juncture in its history. Simply put: James Buchanan was tragically ill equipped to become the nation's chief executive at a time of burgeoning crises.

The inaugural ceremony that took place on March 4, 1857 was in many ways one of the most momentous in American history. It contained a number of significant firsts and lasts. The ceremony was the first to be photographed and the first to take place after the formation of the Republican Party. On the other hand, it was the last that included the participation of all states before secession, and it marked the last time a Democratic president would take the oath for more than a generation, or until 1885, to be exact. Few inaugurations have been as portentous or as different in tone and substance from the subsequent ceremony held four years later.



FIGURE 1: The James Buchanan Inaugural, March 4, 1857. Photograph attributed to John Wood. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, American Treasures Collection.

Buchanan's speech that day consisted of four major components, with the most striking contrast being between the section on slavery and the section on foreign relations. The new president was poised to take an activist role in foreign affairs because, as we shall see, he felt entirely comfortable in that arena. He used roughly twice as many passive verbs in the portion on slavery as he did in the section on America's relations with other powers.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, he offered few declaratory sentences in the slavery portion whereas he put forward a number of commands in the section centered on diplomacy. The significant contrast in the kind of language employed by the new president across the entire speech serves to cast it—and his presidency—in a new light.

After the traditional and perfunctory opening, Buchanan reflected on what he believed had been the salubrious effects of the recently concluded election. He attributed his election to "the inherent love for the Constitution

and Union which still animates the hearts of the American people." Notwithstanding the swirling "passions" of the campaign, "when the people proclaimed their will the tempest at once subsided and all was calm." The new president took pride that "our own country could alone have exhibited so grand and striking a spectacle of the capacity of man for self-government." At the same time, he announced that he had "determined not to become a candidate for reelection," so that the presumed good will surrounding his election not be marred by any ambition on his part. His ultimate aim, he said, would be to execute the office of president "in such a manner as to restore harmony and ancient friendship among the peoples of the several States."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the promotion of "harmony" was the very touchstone for the entirety of Buchanan's long political and diplomatic career.

In the next section of the speech, he discussed at length the enduring sectional tension and hoped that "every Union-loving man [would] exert his best influence to suppress [the] agitation" over slavery. Once again, Buchanan urged the restoration of harmony and an end to agitation. On the critical question of admission of slavery into the territories he stated: "A difference of opinion has arisen in regard to the point of time when the people of a territory shall decide this question for themselves. This is, happily, a matter of little practical importance." This statement leads directly to his famous allusion to the impending Dred Scott decision, saying that the timing of the determination of slavery in a territory "is a judicial question, which legitimately belongs to the Supreme Court of the United States, before whom it is now pending, and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled." Whatever that settlement, the president would "cheerfully submit" to it.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Buchanan publicly prescribed a passive role for the chief executive while conveying his earnest hope that the courts could and would settle this divisive issue.

Throughout this second section, we see that Buchanan wrote with the sensibilities of a diplomat, or one who serves more as an observer of events than as a participant in them. Two other examples convey this same sense of detachment: "May we not, then, hope that the long agitation on this subject [slavery] is approaching its end," and "Most happy it will be for the country when the public mind shall be diverted from this question to others of more pressing and practical importance." Rather than proposing any forceful or specific action Buchanan notes that "Time is a great corrective."<sup>9</sup> The president is seemingly prepared to let time pass and events unfold as they will.



In the third section on the public debt, however, we see the beginnings of a transition in style and presentation. Buchanan's language at once becomes more forceful, and he begins to employ a series of "shoulds" and "oughts": "no more revenue *ought* [*italics mine*] to be collected from the people than the amount necessary to defray the expenses of a wise, economical, and efficient administration of the government."<sup>10</sup> With regard to the tariff, "a spirit of fairness and equality ought to govern." Likewise, Buchanan is direct in the portion of the speech discussing the disposition of public lands: "we *should* never forget that it is our cardinal policy to preserve these lands, as much as may be, for actual settlers, and this at moderate prices. We *shall* thus ... secure homes for our children and children's children."<sup>11</sup>

Even more pronounced are his directives in this section regarding the prospects of building a "military road" such as a transcontinental railroad: "I ... *consider it clear* that under the war-making power *Congress may appropriate money* towards the construction of a military road when this is absolutely necessary for the defence [*sic*] of any State or Territory of the Union against foreign invasion. . . . I believe that many of the difficulties in the way, which now appear formidable, *will* in a great degree *vanish* as soon as the nearest and best route shall have been satisfactorily ascertained."<sup>12</sup> Hence, in the portions relating to finances and external affairs Buchanan showed strength and directness not evinced in his rather lackluster pronouncements on the sectional turmoil.

Buchanan's most powerful and eloquent statements, however, were in the concluding section on foreign affairs. Here he used more than a few "shoulds" and "oughts," and particularly in the first paragraph: "We *ought* to cultivate peace, commerce, and friendship with all nations"; "Our diplomacy *should* be direct and frank, neither seeking to obtain more nor accepting less than is our due"; "We *ought* to cherish a sacred regard for the independence of all nations, and never attempt to interfere in the domestic concerns of any unless this shall be imperatively required by the great laws of self-preservation"; "We *ought* to do justice, in a kindly spirit to all nations and require justice from them in return." Buchanan also took pains to delineate the foreign policy principles of his predecessors, principles "from which we should never depart."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, and at the very outset of the administration, we see the contours of what would become a foreign policy presidency.

Reaction to the speech was mixed. *Harper's* hailed the address and expressed optimism that the new president could restore the Union to its

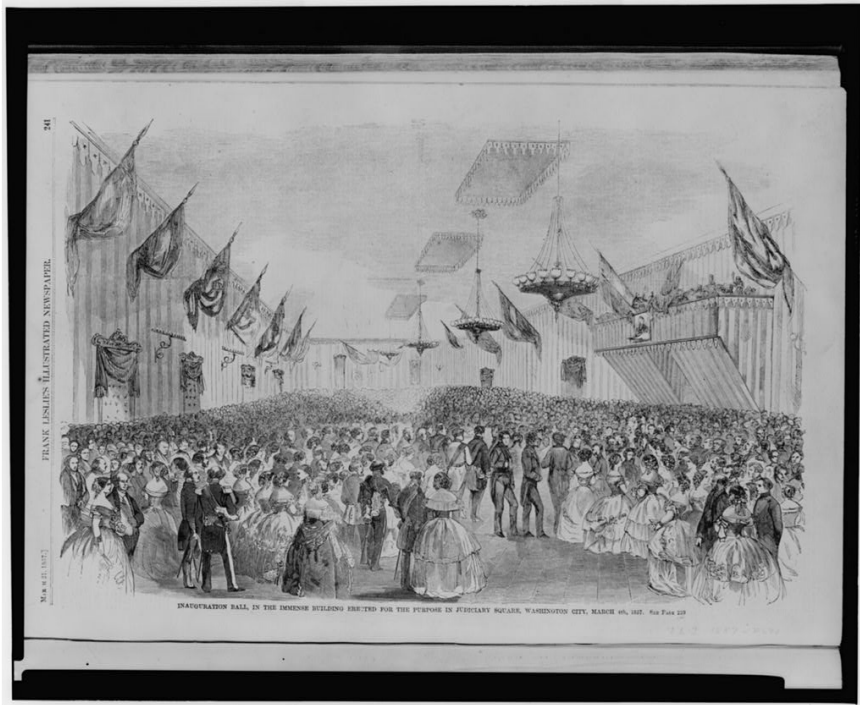


FIGURE 2: Inaugural Ball, March 4, 1857. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-4188.

former strength.<sup>14</sup> The *New York Times*, on the other hand, was much more critical of both the speech and its author: “Little if any impression has been made by the inaugural. No paper of the sort has ever been less discussed in political circles. As an intellectual production, it has no claim to superiority, and is below the standard of many of the papers prepared by Mr. Buchanan when Secretary of State, and even more recently as Minister to England.” In its analysis of Buchanan’s presentation of the slavery issue, the *Times* was quite correct. Similarly, the paper also wanted no part of what it conceived as a weak apologetic for “squatter sovereignty,” even going so far as to suggest that Lewis Cass and other partisans had somehow seized and altered the original text prepared by the president-elect himself.<sup>15</sup>

By nineteenth-century standards, the speech was logically formulated and articulated. Yet it served neither the president nor the nation well. This outcome is in many respects quite surprising. James Buchanan was on paper the best-trained president of the nineteenth century and would remain as such

until the accession of Herbert Hoover seventy years later. But it was the very nature of that preparation that was largely the new president's undoing. In order to understand the lasting effects of Buchanan's training on his inaugural address and his presidency, we must consider his long diplomatic career prior to becoming president. Then we will be able to understand why Buchanan employed the language he did and how his very words foretold doom for the administration and ultimately the Union itself.

James Buchanan began his political career as a Federalist during the days of the Monroe administration. After serving in a number of state offices in Pennsylvania, he was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1820. He apparently had an indirect role in the "corrupt bargain" of the 1824 Presidential campaign that denied Andrew Jackson the presidency.<sup>16</sup> But Jackson returned to prevail in 1828, and Buchanan in the meantime had helped to organize the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania. Buchanan and his supporters expected him to play an important role in Old Hickory's administration. Jackson was nothing, however, if not consistent in his personal relations; he never forgave or trusted Buchanan for his alleged complicity in the events of 1824. This led the president to send him to Russia as minister in 1831. The appointment to St. Petersburg must have appeared to Buchanan, as it surely did to everyone else, as a literal and figurative exile, but characteristically and much to his credit, he took to his role admirably.

Before embarking for the Russian cold, Buchanan mastered French. His familiarity with that language of diplomacy served him well in his associations with the Russian foreign minister, Count Nesselrode, and with Russia's minister to the United States, Baron Krudener, who happened to be at St. Petersburg during much of Buchanan's tenure. Buchanan began by making a very favorable impression on Czar Nicholas I, but from there things became increasingly complicated. The United States had long wished to conclude a commercial treaty with Russia, from whom it imported some \$1.6 million of goods and to whom it exported a paltry \$35,000 in 1833, but heretofore without any degree of success. Grasping that the imperial government was badly divided on the merits of a treaty and sensing that all of his dispatches to Washington were being opened and read by the Russians, Buchanan decided to proceed with extreme caution. Over the course of a year, he won the confidence of Nesselrode and Krudener for a treaty that promised to bring hundreds of American commercial vessels to trade through Black Sea ports. Buchanan received assistance in his negotiations when Congress repealed earlier tariffs on hemp and bar iron, thereby making Russian goods much more

attractive to American merchants. The combination of Buchanan's patient diplomacy coupled to the change in American trade policy culminated in the conclusion of a treaty in December, 1832. It was the first time that the czar's government had consented to such a document.<sup>17</sup> Buchanan's Jacksonian exile to Russia, therefore, had the ironic outcome of bringing him back firmly into Democratic Party politics and the country's political life. He was mentioned as a vice presidential candidate in 1836 and 1840 and appeared to be a bona fide contender for the nation's highest office in 1844.<sup>18</sup>

The 1844 presidential campaign took a different turn, however. The result was the nomination and subsequent election of the Jacksonian protégé and dark horse candidate James K. Polk. President Polk, perhaps upon the urging of Jackson himself, decided that the best way to keep an eye on the politically ambitious Buchanan was to bring him into the cabinet. Polk made Buchanan Secretary of State, although Old Hickory apparently opposed appointment to that office.<sup>19</sup> Buchanan would once again demonstrate great skill as a diplomat. Cleanly fitting in with the expansionist policies of the Polk regime, Buchanan had a hand in bringing the Jacksonian vision of America's place in the world to life. To that end, Buchanan successfully concluded negotiations with America's arch-rival, Britain, on the thorny Oregon question. He negotiated with Mexico on Texas and was part of the plan to accelerate the pace of American expansion into the southwest in the wake of the Mexican-American War. The Secretary also promoted aggressively the building of a canal in Central America, although this scheme did not come to fruition. Buchanan undoubtedly was one of the most activist Secretaries of State of the entire antebellum period. His achievements are all the more remarkable given the fact that he and Polk never really liked or trusted one another.<sup>20</sup>

When Polk exited the White House in 1849 for what would be the shortest ex-presidency in the nation's history, Buchanan moved on to what he expected would be a peaceful retirement in his beloved estate of Wheatland, in Lancaster County. Nevertheless, he maintained a relatively heavy hand in Democratic Party politics and again became a leading contender for the presidency in 1852. Neither Buchanan nor his emerging rival Stephen A. Douglas was nominated, however, with the Party turning instead to the handsome—and cataclysmically ineffectual—brigadier Franklin Pierce.

Pierce was elected and Buchanan, buoyed by his success in the Polk years, corresponded with the president-elect regarding the prospect of a reprise in the cabinet of a Democratic administration.<sup>21</sup> Pierce proved to be coy. He declared that he would have no former cabinet members among his inner

circle, and therefore Buchanan could not again expect to occupy the State Department. But, as a leading practitioner of Democratic foreign policy for two decades, Buchanan could not be overlooked, either. Pierce somewhat tepidly offered Old Buck the position of Minister to Great Britain. After a number of fits and starts, Buchanan reluctantly and hesitatingly accepted the appointment to London. He asked for—and believed he had received—a number of accommodations and concessions from the new president and the newly appointed Secretary of State, William Marcy, that he hoped would give him a free hand to shape American diplomacy with Britain and, by implication, Europe as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Buchanan, with this melodrama behind him, arrived at his post in the summer of 1853. There he would remain for nearly three years, or right up to the start of the next presidential campaign. The many hundreds of pages of Buchanan diplomatic correspondence from those thirty-odd months show a minister who was capable of being forceful, yet in the truest sense diplomatic; precise, yet non-committal; fully representative of American interests and the American character, yet easily sociable and, when most constructive, deferential to the sensibilities of English society. Buchanan's letters from this period are very heavily and meticulously edited, so much so that he rarely, if ever, sent anything to his boss Marcy without multiple drafts.<sup>23</sup> The volume of correspondence itself is staggering and perhaps eclipses that of any American minister of that time. These predilections and talents, in turn, would serve Buchanan and American well, for there were a number of perplexing issues facing him and the Pierce administration.

The most perplexing—if not vexing—of these conundrums had to do with the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 and its implications for the Monroe Doctrine. Britain maintained a presence in the Bay Islands and a protectorate along the Mosquito Coast of Central America, meaning that the British Fleet continued to operate freely in the Western Hemisphere. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty appeared to sanction and codify this arrangement. Buchanan, who had never favored the Treaty, upon his arrival in London entered into a protracted series of discussions with the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, as to the exact meaning and implications of the document. A firm supporter of the Monroe Doctrine, Buchanan pressed the case that Britain should limit its operations in Central America and, ideally, should withdraw from the region entirely. Clarendon, on the other hand, countered that the Treaty merely documented and preserved British interests as they had been in 1850. As a point of honor, Britain could never relinquish those existing claims.<sup>24</sup> While

no resolution came during Buchanan's tenure at the Court of St. James, Buchanan's patient diplomacy helped to avoid a full-blown Anglo-American crisis over these conflicting views of the Treaty.

The United States at this time also struggled to maintain neutrality during the Crimean War between Britain and Russia. Such neutrality was often complicated by clear Russophilic sentiments in the United States. For example, hundreds of U.S. citizens elected to serve in the Russian army, and guns and munitions were regularly sent by Americans in support of the czar's forces.<sup>25</sup> A related and equally complicated issue facing Buchanan and Marcy had to do with ongoing British recruitment of American citizens for service in the British army. The Pierce administration regarded these actions as egregious violations of American law and neutrality. The matter was further inflamed by the involvement of the British minister to the U.S., John Crampton, who was directly implicated in the recruitment scandal. Crampton and a number of British consuls had aggressively recruited scores of men from Philadelphia to serve in the British armed forces. Eventually, the situation deteriorated to the extent that U.S. marshals seized the British consul at Cincinnati. At the end of 1855, Secretary Marcy demanded Crampton's recall.<sup>26</sup>

The British government, for its part, denied any direct knowledge of either Crampton's actions or of the precise meaning of American neutrality laws. Clarendon was unmoved by Buchanan's pleas to halt recruiting while the new prime minister, Lord Palmerston, displayed open hostility to American interests. Palmerston professed outrage to Buchanan regarding American assistance to Russia and asserted that the U.S. was fomenting rebellion in Ireland. The prime minister's response to Crampton's recall was to order re-inforcements of the North American British Fleet and to condemn the U.S. in Parliament. For a time, it looked like the United States and Britain might go to war over the recruitment crisis.<sup>27</sup> But Buchanan's carefully cultivated relationship with Clarendon and unwavering patience ultimately helped to avoid the worst consequences. His efforts in this regard often blunted the inexperienced and coarse communications from Marcy and Pierce. Buchanan was able to depart England in 1856 confident that American interests were no worse off than they had been when he arrived nearly three years earlier. In so doing, he made it possible for his successor to the Court of St. James, George M. Dallas, to conclude a convention with Clarendon in the summer of 1856 that stifled the prospects for war.<sup>28</sup>

More impressive still were Buchanan's observations on diplomatic affairs throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote dispatches to

Secretary Marcy and to his colleagues in Brussels and at The Hague about the necessity of coordinating the work of the various American missions in Europe. As an indirect consequence of this kind networking, Buchanan joined with his counterparts in Paris and Madrid to formulate the Ostend Manifesto. The Manifesto was drawn up on the explicit instructions of Pierce and Marcy. It was designed to realize expansionist aims in Cuba either through the payment of upwards of \$120 million to Spain or, if necessary and expedient, by armed insurrection. Buchanan initially opposed the formulation of such a document, but the final product certainly reflected his own views of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine. Moreover, it is clear that he edited the final text.<sup>29</sup> When published back in the United States, the Manifesto infuriated many in the North who feared an expansion of the “slave power,” causing both Pierce and Marcy to publicly disavow both the conference and the document. Nonetheless, the Manifesto ultimately served to win Buchanan additional support from expansionists at the Cincinnati nominating convention.<sup>30</sup>

Even more significant for the long-term interests of the United States in foreign affairs, however, were Buchanan’s observations on the changing nature of European politics. He determined that Europe in the mid-1850s was already functioning as a “commonwealth of nations” demanding a commensurate and sophisticated response from the United States.<sup>31</sup> In most instances, Buchanan proved to be an able observer and correspondent on the nature of European politics and diplomacy in the mid-nineteenth century.

As Buchanan was completing his tenure at the Court of St. James, it looked as though no nationally known Democrat would be able to command the necessary two-thirds of all delegates to be nominated at Cincinnati. Douglas had been wounded by Kansas-Nebraska; Cass, the 1848 nominee, looked to all to be too old and feeble; and President Pierce, while embarking on a last-minute and desperate campaign for re-election, had no real standing in any section of the country.<sup>32</sup> Only James Buchanan, who by his absence had escaped the recent domestic political turmoil, seemed to have any chance of uniting the party and the nation.

Against this backdrop, Buchanan’s drive toward the presidency rates as one of the most remarkable non-campaigns in American history. Most of its foundation was laid at a distance of 3,000 miles or as Buchanan completed his tenure in London. Using the patience, discretion, and sensitivity that had served him so well throughout his diplomatic career, Buchanan was able to instruct his surrogates—most notably John Slidell of Louisiana—to place



him as the only viable—meaning only bona fide national—candidate for the nation's highest office.

Buchanan's skillful and diplomatic campaign for the presidency from London began in earnest in February, 1856. He wrote that he was grateful for the "exertions of his friends in Pennsylvania on his behalf."<sup>33</sup> Buchanan said he remained "indifferent" to the prospects of a presidential term, but he acknowledged that no "patriotic" man would shrink from the nation's highest office if it were thrust upon him.<sup>34</sup> He elaborated: "it would be difficult for one to decline the honor. Indeed such a nomination would almost seem to be Providential."<sup>35</sup> Buchanan otherwise encouraged politicians in and around the city of Philadelphia to continue to put forward his name, while he remained fully apprised of the continuing efforts of Slidell and others on his behalf in the months before his return to the United States.

Buchanan arrived in the US in April 1856. He was nominated by the Cincinnati convention in May and did no active campaigning. His strategy of remaining above the fray served him well politically while also suiting him temperamentally. Buchanan's operatives used his diplomatic posturing to argue that Buchanan was the only man who had the stature to win a national election and thereby save the Union. To the degree that Buchanan communicated at all during the campaign, he for the most part re-affirmed the deliberately vague Cincinnati platform and contrasted his ability to hold the Union intact with what he believed were the serious dangers posed by his "sectional" opponent, John C. Fremont, first presidential nominee of the Republican Party.<sup>36</sup>

As vague and non-committal as Buchanan was on slavery and domestic politics in general, he was quite forceful in expressing his opinions on one issue: the necessity of building a transcontinental railroad. Buchanan's support served a political purpose, of course, but it was also rooted firmly in his foreign policy experience. He thought that Congress had the authority to build the transcontinental line out of its war-making powers. Such a route, he insisted, was critical for the nation's defense in the event of a foreign invasion.<sup>37</sup> In the realm of diplomacy, Buchanan had always known his own mind and had spoken directly, and he did not shrink from doing so here.

Buchanan and his surrogates ran a masterful campaign, notwithstanding the juggernaut that was the emerging Republican Party. He carried just enough Northern states and won enough electoral votes to prevail.<sup>38</sup> Buchanan interpreted his election as a mandate for democracy and Union and proceeded to fashion his administration on that basis. The selection of

his cabinet turned out to be a slow, laborious, and almost painful process, however. Buchanan was as cautious and meticulous in his deliberations over the cabinet as he had been in his years of diplomatic service. While deliberating on the makeup of his cabinet in the months leading to the inaugural, Buchanan wrote extensively on foreign affairs. He continued to correspond with his former counterpart Clarendon.<sup>39</sup> Buchanan from the outset had a clear sense of where he wanted his administration to go with regard to foreign policy.

Buchanan's painstakingly slow construction of his cabinet has received sharp criticism, but it is entirely in keeping with his temperament and sensibilities. Lincoln, on the other hand, has been widely praised for building a ministry of all talents and working with men like Seward and Chase who had been his political opponents.<sup>40</sup> The shortcomings of the Buchanan cabinet, meanwhile, comprise four points. First, the president did irreparable damage to the cabinet and to his party by ignoring supporters of Stephen Douglas. For reasons that were as much personal as political, the Little Giant and Old Buck never could abide one another. Buchanan appointed no Douglasites to the cabinet, and this, in turn, widened the gulf between the two men and their respective Party factions. Second, the new president formed a cabinet that was decidedly and, in the context of sectional strife, fatally pro-Southern. Men like Howell Cobb, Jacob Thompson, and John B. Floyd could hardly have been counted on to provide a balanced view of competing sectional interests. Cobb in this sense was a particularly dubious appointment in that as a strong Southern partisan he became Buchanan's confidante and closest advisor.<sup>41</sup> Both of these failings reveal that the diplomat Buchanan could not tolerate and would not have strongly articulated and competing views among the men making up his council of state.

Similarly, a third aspect of the criticism of the Buchanan cabinet has to do with the appointment of the aged Lewis Cass as Secretary of State. Despite that fact that there certainly were abler (and younger) men of talent available, Buchanan in the period just before his inaugural finally chose the rapidly failing veteran of the War of 1812. Buchanan expected to serve as his own Secretary of State and hoped and expected Cass to accept his role as a cipher.<sup>42</sup> Buchanan had never been happier than in the days when he sat at his desk in the State Department, a locale to which he often returned as president. He was much more comfortable there than in the White House.

The final and most pointed criticism of the Buchanan cabinet is that the president cherished to an almost obsessive degree "harmony" among

his appointments. Such a predilection had a personal, as well as political, element. Buchanan, lacking an immediate family of his own, treated his cabinet members and their relations like an extended family. He probably spent more time with his cabinet than any president in American history. He met long hours with them, socialized regularly with them, and even knew the intimate details of their finances and lives. Thus, the president's ability to work with the cabinet as a political body was severely compromised by his need to fill a familial void.<sup>43</sup>

The cabinet Buchanan constructed between the election and the inaugural was undoubtedly one of the weakest in antebellum American history, and it certainly did not serve the country well in the tumultuous years of 1857–61. The cabinet's final disintegration in the secession crisis of 1860–61 would certainly seem to substantiate this observation. Yet, there may be another reason that Buchanan insisted on harmony, even to the degree of eschewing political common sense and the crying necessity of balancing sectional and political interests. Buchanan sought to formulate a cabinet that was more in keeping with the British model, a model he had only recently observed at the Court of St. James. In Britain, the byword is consensus, not competition or conflicting views, among members of the cabinet. As one chronicler of the British constitution has written: "Cabinet responsibility is one, united and indivisible. . . . members must stand or fall together."<sup>44</sup> The British prime minister constructs his/her cabinet with an eye to forging unity, and this became the premise that Buchanan unwaveringly followed. His observation of the seamless efforts of Palmerton and Clarendon—it should be added many times to the detriment of the United States—became part of his thought processes. Indeed, his letters written between the election and the inauguration suggest that he continued to observe and admire the British cabinet model in action.<sup>45</sup>

With these proclivities, Buchanan took the oath on March 4, 1857. As we have seen, Buchanan's inaugural address is consistent with a man who had spent the preponderance of his career as a diplomat. Accordingly, the new president viewed the enduring sectional conflict with an eye to balancing competing interests, or almost as if North and South were two separate entities or nations. As he had done throughout his diplomatic career, Buchanan would now seek a negotiated settlement to strife within the boundaries of the law—in this case within the framework of the Constitution—so as to promote stability and harmony. It is not an exaggeration to say that Buchanan hoped to operate as a kind of secretary general of the confederacy that he understood

to be the United States. He serenely professed that he was the remnant of an earlier political generation that began with Washington, continued through Monroe, J. Q. Adams, and Clay, and reached its peak with the Compromise of 1850.<sup>46</sup> That generation had always been relied upon to use negotiation and persuasion to find a solution to any vexing issue. Indeed, Buchanan no doubt believed that this was precisely why the people of the United States had elected him president in the first place.

Similarly, Buchanan's diplomatic background influenced his inaugural remarks on the Dred Scott case. His longstanding reliance upon law, particularly international law, in settling complex disputes was clearly in evidence also.<sup>47</sup> Much scholarship has been devoted to Buchanan's role as president-elect in helping to finalize the Supreme Court's decision in Dred Scott, including his extra-constitutional influence on Justice Grier to side with the Court majority.<sup>48</sup> Such exertions by Buchanan are rightly taken as ample evidence of his pro-Southern leanings, but, in the context of what we have already seen, Buchanan may have had an additional purpose. Conceiving of North and South as two distinct sections whose interests needed to be balanced almost as if they were foreign states, the president-elect viewed the Supreme Court as a kind of international tribunal. The tribunal—or, rather, Court—would interpret and apply the precepts of a treaty—in this case the Constitution of the United States—to bring about what Buchanan no doubt earnestly hoped would be a final settlement. Buchanan's optimism that both sections would accept this peculiar version of "finality" was clearly misguided, to say the least, but his outlook was grounded in his experience in law and deep-seated conviction that the strategies of diplomatic intercourse could settle any and all disputes.

Buchanan's actions in the months following his inauguration also bear the tell-tale mark of an attempt to apply diplomatic solutions to domestic American difficulties. That is, Buchanan's attitudes toward the South must be viewed in the context of his diplomatic service. Most recent scholarship has suggested that Buchanan was either pro-slavery or "anti-antislavery."<sup>49</sup> Buchanan in fact had been no great supporter of the institution of slavery even while he continued to befriend Southerners. As one of his more sentimental biographers wrote many years ago, he "had no admiration for [slavery]."<sup>50</sup> In a letter written just before the opening of the 1856 campaign, Buchanan criticized the South for its continuing pro-slavery agitation because it had played into the hands of abolitionists and complicated his own efforts to get that section's interests fairly represented. He expressed exasperation

that he had been “embarrassed by a fire in the rear” when attempting to defend that section.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, Buchanan as president was a staunch defender of the institution of slavery in the context of international relations, even while he disapproved of and fought against practices like filibustering.<sup>52</sup> In a fall 1857 letter to Secretary Cass, the president expressed sharp disapproval of a prospective treaty that would provide a “gratuitous censure on an institution recognized and maintained by our constitution and productive of advantages both to the master and the slave as well as necessary to the existence of the cotton manufactures of Great Britain and other countries.”<sup>53</sup> To Buchanan, therefore, the South and its “peculiar institution” represented interests that had to be balanced and accommodated by negotiation both within and outside the Union. There would have to be a legally arbitrated Constitutional “treaty” between North and South in order to provide peace, harmony, and prosperity. For Buchanan, and in marked contrast to Lincoln, the Union in fact consisted of “two houses” that would have to reach an agreement on the volatile issue of slavery.

Buchanan’s inaugural address was the logical byproduct of his years of foreign service and his sensibilities of tact, indirectness, and discretion. The composition of his cabinet, moreover, reflected his tastes perfectly. The new president’s optimism for a diplomatic settlement on the slavery question generally, and confidence in legal solutions like *Dred Scott* in particular, stemmed from his own sense that interests could always be balanced, compromises always be reached, and virtually any kind of conflict could always be resolved through patient negotiation. Let us give some credit to Buchanan in March, 1857 for at least having preached what he had always practiced.

But, as events would have it, the new president’s diplomatic skills were no match for the storm over Kansas in 1857. The shrewdness, patience, and sense of compromise that Buchanan had shown in foreign relations deserted him in the heat of the moment as he made the appallingly undiplomatic decision to seek immediate ratification of the baldly pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution. He uncharacteristically and recklessly tried to force a final settlement on the nation regarding Kansas specifically and slavery generally. Instead, his actions provoked an uproar throughout the North and won him few additional friends in the South. Buchanan’s clumsy and undiplomatic exercise of executive authority turned out to be nothing short of disastrous.<sup>54</sup>

Despite this cataclysm, the Buchanan devoted little space to Kansas in his first annual message of December, 1857. Rather, he followed a formula similar to that employed in his inaugural address nine months before. The president spent most of the message discussing finances and foreign affairs, relegating Kansas to the end of the document.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the remainder of his presidency, Buchanan would display an affinity for foreign relations while being stymied and frankly repelled by domestic matters.

Much later, Buchanan as ex-president characteristically devoted the culminating chapter of his autobiographical apologetic "Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion" to what he considered to be his long string of successes in diplomatic relations. It should be noted that significant by its absence in this chapter is the name "Lewis Cass." As Buchanan saw it, his own personal achievements included improvements in relations with Spain; resolution of all outstanding issues with Great Britain; successful negotiation with China on a host of commercial matters; favorable alteration in the tone and tenor of relations with Paraguay; and clarification of American policy with regard to Mexico. Buchanan, here writing as elder statesman, also produced a cogent history of the Monroe Doctrine, of which he believed he had proven to be a worthy inheritor and practitioner. He no doubt fervently hoped and expected that—notwithstanding his many domestic failures—posterity would recognize that "the administration of Mr. Buchanan, in conducting our foreign affairs, met with great and uncommon success."<sup>56</sup>

James Buchanan's inaugural address signifies a number of important endings in American history. The Buchanan administration brought to a conclusion the antebellum presidency. And, as Buchanan himself suspected, his term represented the end of a generation as he became the last American president to have been born in the eighteenth century. Buchanan's address and its concomitant view of the presidential office also marked the beginning of the end of one conception of the American presidency, a conception that said that the president's domestic and international roles could be separated or even compartmentalized. By the start of the twentieth century, presidents would have to fight corruption at home and carry a "big stick" in international affairs at the same time. But presidents could not be diplomats, at least exclusively; instead, they would have to conceive a vigorous foreign policy and charge diplomatic surrogates with carrying that policy around the world. And when twentieth-century presidents attempted to act unilaterally and

without strong surrogates in foreign affairs, they many times created more problems than they solved.<sup>57</sup>

One final and ironic scenario presents itself. If Buchanan had not been a candidate in 1856 and had instead retired for a second time to Wheatland, is it possible that he could have been coaxed from retirement by the rail-splitter elected president in 1860? Is it conceivable that Lincoln, who relied on Buchanan's arch-nemesis Stephen Douglas for advice and support in the months preceding his own inauguration, would have called upon that other great Democrat, the "Old Public Functionary," one last time to serve as a minister, perhaps again to Imperial Russia? Such a scenario is admittedly counterfactual, but it no doubt would have held out the prospect of a final diplomatic success for a man whom modern scholars continue to sense deserves a more complete and nuanced assessment in the pages of history.

## NOTES

1. For example, in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly* vol. 112, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 179–90, Buchanan is ranked next to last, or 38<sup>th</sup> out of the 39 presidents rated. The 1999 C-SPAN poll places him dead last, or 41<sup>st</sup>. Lincoln is almost always ranked first.
2. Philip Shriver Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 268, 272.
3. For example, George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan, Fifteenth President of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 2:187–88. Curtis reprints the inaugural address on the pages following but offers no commentary on it.
4. Don E. Fehrenbacher, Robert Johannsen, Elbert Smith, Kenneth M. Stampp, "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), 171–202. Professor Johannsen's perceptive questions appear on page 185.
5. Frederick Moore Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994); Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004). While Binder and Baker are both insightful and add much to our understanding of Buchanan, Klein's work nevertheless remains the standard because it offers a comprehensive biographical assessment.
6. He used twenty-nine passive verbs in the fifty-eight lines pertaining to the slavery issue and used eight passive verbs in the thirty-three lines pertaining to foreign relations. See below.
7. James Buchanan, "Inaugural Address, March 4, 1857" in Irving J. Sloan, ed., *James Buchanan 1791–1868: Chronology - Documents - Bibliographical Aids* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1968), 21–22. All accounts are that Buchanan composed the speech himself and largely in seclusion.



- It has been reprinted many times by many Buchanan biographers notwithstanding the fact the few of them have discussed its content or meaning.
8. Ibid, 22–23.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Ibid, 24.
  11. Ibid. From the 1830s, Buchanan had supported the sale of public lands since the practice generated a surplus for the Treasury. As president, however, public lands would prove to be another intractable issue for him. Disputes over public lands contributed to the bloodbath in Kansas in 1857, and the president would later veto the Homestead Bill (1860), which cost him additional support in the North. See, for instance, Klein, *James Buchanan*, 287, 311, 345.
  12. Buchanan, “Inaugural Address,” 25.
  13. Ibid, 26.
  14. *Harper's Weekly*, March 7, 1857.
  15. *New York Times*, April 7, 1857.
  16. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 49–53. Buchanan had been a prosperous lawyer before entering politics. For an excellent discussion of the change overtaking American politics [and young politicians like Buchanan] in the days before the advent of Jackson, see David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Buchanan was one of the “young Federalists” in Pennsylvania who eventually turned to the Democratic Party. See 47, 182–99.
  17. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 83–86; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 16–22.
  18. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 151–62. Buchanan had a successful career in the United States Senate from 1834 to 1845.
  19. Ibid, 163; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 57–59.
  20. See Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 57–160, for a masterful treatment of Buchanan's tenure as Secretary of State. For his complex relations with Polk, see Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 192–93.
  21. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 213–20. Two excellent treatments of the 1852 campaign can be found in Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 339–73, and Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 726–64.
  22. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 161–73; Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 221–27. The concessions from Pierce and Marcy proved to be illusory, however.
  23. Two examples, among many: James Buchanan to William L. Marcy, July 20, 1855; Idem to Idem, September 21, 1855, James Buchanan Papers at Historical Society of Pennsylvania, microfilm roll 50, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA (hereafter cited as Buchanan Papers).
  24. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 177–80; Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 230–32.
  25. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 194–95.
  26. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 243–45; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 188–94.
  27. Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 186; 194–96.
  28. Ibid., 214; 229–30.
  29. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 239–41; Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 207–10; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 64–68.

30. This assessment according to Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 216.
31. Buchanan to Marcy, October 12, 1855, Buchanan Papers, roll 50.
32. One of the casualties of the Kansas-Nebraska fiasco was President Pierce's ability to wield patronage in any meaningful way, only serving to weaken further that hapless chief executive among the ranks of his own party. See, for instance, Holt, *Rise and Fall*, 965.
33. Buchanan to William Bigler, February 12, 1856, in Buchanan Papers, roll 50.
34. Buchanan to Marcy, February 15, 1856, in *ibid*.
35. Buchanan to Edward Y. Buchanan, March 4, 1856, in *ibid*.
36. Buchanan to William B. Reed, September 14, 1856 in *ibid*.
37. Buchanan to B. F. Washington, September 17, 1856, in *ibid*.
38. According to Holt in *Rise and Fall*, Buchanan's 1856 candidacy appealed to "Union-loving Whigs" in the North who "deemed Buchanan, rather than Fillmore, the best hope of stopping Fremont" (975). On the other hand, southern Whigs went for the American Party candidate in large numbers.
39. Buchanan to Clarendon, February 23, 1856, in Buchanan Papers, roll 50. This is a very telling letter insofar as diplomacy and construction of the cabinet. Buchanan expresses great friendship for Clarendon and says that he will do everything in his own power after he becomes president to bring about better relations between the United States and Great Britain.
40. For example, William E. Gienapp, "No Bed of Roses': James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, and Presidential Leadership in the Civil War Era," in *Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 98–100.
41. *Ibid*, 102; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 79.
42. Two examples, among many: Binder, *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 221–23; Baker, *James Buchanan*, 79.
43. Klein, *President James Buchanan*, 275–78.
44. Goldwin Smith, *A Constitutional and Legal History of England* (New York: Dorset, 1990), 375.
45. Buchanan to Joshua Bates, November 6, 1856, Buchanan Papers, roll 50.
46. Buchanan to Reed, September 14, 1856, in *ibid*.
47. We have already seen this in Buchanan's support of neutrality laws while minister to Great Britain. For his subsequent attentiveness to neutrality laws and international law as president, see Robert E. May, "James Buchanan, the Neutrality Laws, and American Invasions of Nicaragua" in *Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 123–41, especially 131.
48. The classic treatment of the Dred Scott decision remains Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For president-elect Buchanan's role in bringing Justice Grier into line with the majority, see 307, 311–13. A comprehensive assessment of Buchanan's pro-Southern leanings as the basis for his Dred Scott intervention can be found in William H. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, vol. II: Secessionists Triumphant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Freehling offers a persuasive portrait of Buchanan as a "Borderite," or one who grew up near the slave state of Maryland, leading him to befriend Southerners and appoint them to office. See especially 97–105. At the same time, Freehling acknowledges that the new president sought a definitive judgment on the slavery issue from the Supreme Court so as to avoid problems in his administration (109–11). In other words, Buchanan hoped that the Court would provide a basis for the kind of harmony he had worked for throughout

- his diplomatic career. The strategy backfired, and Buchanan's extra-constitutional intervention "fatally crippled" his presidency (119).
49. Baker, *James Buchanan*, 138; Don Fehrenbacher, "James Buchanan: A Reassessment," 181.
  50. This opinion is from his nephew, James Buchanan Henry. See James Buchanan Henry, "Biographical Sketch" in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1911), 12:332.
  51. Buchanan to Seibels, October 18, 1855, Buchanan Papers, roll 50.
  52. Buchanan provided unflinching international and diplomatic support to slavery even while remaining a staunch opponent to practices like filibustering, or the activities of "American adventurers who raised or participated in private military forces that either invaded or planned to invade foreign countries with which the United States was formally at peace." See Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), xii. May discusses at length Buchanan's opposition to filibustering, including extensive references in the president's first annual message of December, 1857 (124–26), and his receipt of a commendation from Pope Pius IX for his opposition to the practice (217).
  53. Buchanan to Lewis Cass, October 24, 1857, Buchanan Papers, rolls 50.
  54. The best account of the Kansas disaster remains Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially 266–331. According to Stampp, Buchanan overreached and pressed for a definitive solution because thought he could carry the day and because he was personally sympathetic to the position of the South regarding the territories. My fundamental view is that Buchanan the consummate diplomat was ultimately inept in exercising executive authority.
  55. James Buchanan, "First Annual Message, December 8, 1857," in *James Buchanan 1791–1868*, 27–39. Buchanan devotes approximately three pages to finances, five pages to foreign affairs, and four pages to Kansas, in that order.
  56. James Buchanan, "Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion," (1866) in *Works of Buchanan*, 12:236–61. Binder finds something less than "uncommon success" in foreign affairs, despite Buchanan's passion for such matters. See *Buchanan and the American Empire*, 218–76. On the other hand, Buchanan's fondness for and staunch defense of the Monroe Doctrine is evident throughout his career and in his Inaugural Address. In this respect, Buchanan was true to his principles and consistent in his actions as president, as we see from this memoir.
  57. Arguably the most successful twentieth-century presidents in foreign policy were those who were assisted by strong secretaries of state: Nixon-Kissinger; Truman-Marshall; Eisenhower-Dulles. Those presidents who for whatever reason acted unilaterally or as their own secretaries of state in times of crisis often were far less successful, e.g., Wilson, FDR [at Yalta], Carter [at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis], and George W. Bush.