PITTSBURGH NEWSPAPER REACTION TO JAMES BUCHANAN AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN 1856

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In this year of the "Big American Shindig" (as the British cartoonist, Low, has described any presidential election year in the United States) the people of Pennsylvania are reminded that James Buchanan was our only native son to serve as President. A hundred years ago, and just before Buchanan's election, the United States needed leadership of the highest level to help carry it through its "time of troubles" brought on particularly by the slavery question. The successive administrations of Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, and Franklin Pierce had been unable to come up with a solution to this problem rooted deep in the diverse political, economic, and social interests of the North, South, and West alike. As a result many Americans turned to James Buchanan for this needed leadership. Here was a man with experience as a legislator, administrator, and diplomat, having served in the Pennsylvania legislature, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and as Minister to Russia, Secretary of State, and Minister to England. Having been at the Court of St. James since the middle of 1853, he had the added asset of not having been too intimately identified with the vexing domestic problems of the times; this made him even more desirable as a candidate for the Democratic Party, in its own right torn by the issues of the day. His rather inspiring presence, high level of intelligence, and extensive experience in the affairs of the nation all helped make him acceptable to large segments of the electorate.1 Finally, there were many Democrats who looked favorably on Buchanan's age (he was 65 in 1856) and anticipated a mature approach to problems; to them, this would be a welcome change from that of Pierce who was only 47 when nominated in 1852.

Although there had been some considerable sentiment in Buchan-

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an's favor during the late forties and early fifties, the movement aimed at having him nominated for the Presidency clearly took form by early 1856. Of course, Pennsylvania's Democrats played a prominent role in bringing this about. When they met at Harrisburg on March 4 to elect delegates to the National Convention, they made no effort to conceal their choice. Hendrick B. Wright of Luzerne County, Permanent Chairman of this State Convention, put the matter squarely before the delegates when he said:

We come here as a unit—we come here undivided—we come here to carry out a single purpose, and that purpose is to present, through this Commonwealth, to the nation at large, a man who is in every way qualified to discharge the

2 His name had been put before the National Convention in 1844, 1848, and 1852. Curtis, his biographer, called him the "fittest candidate whom the Democrats could have adopted" in 1848 but Buchanan did not press his claims to the nomination "at the risk of impairing its [the Democratic Party's] harmony and efficiency." — George Ticknor Curtis, Life of James Buchanan, 2 vols., New York, Harpers, 1883, II, 8. In a letter of June 24, 1852, to Cave Johnson, Buchanan wrote, "I never felt any longing or anxious desire to be the President, and my disappointment did not cost me a single pang. . . . Personally, I am entirely satisfied with the result." This referred to his being passed over for Pierce in 1852. See Curtis, Life of James Buchanan, II, 40. Yet in contrast, 3½ years later he admitted in a letter to his good friend John Slidell that he had been " . . . anxious to be nominated by the last Baltimore Convention, if this could have been accomplished upon honorable principles." — See this letter of December 28, 1855, in John Bassett Moore, ed, The Works of James Buchanan, Comprising His Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence, 12 vols., Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1908-1911, IX, 486.

3 Many of his letters from England in late 1855 and early 1856 included references to his possible candidacy. In one, of November 9, 1855, to his niece, Miss Harriet Lane, he stated, "You speak to me concerning the Presidency. You of all other persons best know that even if there were no other cogent reasons, the state of my health is not such as would enable me to undergo the intense anxiety & fatigue incident to wearing that crown of thorns. Of course I wish nothing said about the state of my health." A week later in another letter to Miss Lane he wrote, "If I had any views to the Presidency, which I have not . . . ." Again, in the letter of December 28, 1855, to Slidell, he stated quite firmly, "No desire lurks in my bosom to become President." On February 8, 1856, he inferred "that my Presidential stock is declining in the market." And by February 12, while writing to Governor Bigler, he stated, "In regard to the Presidency to which you refer, if my own wishes had been consulted, my name should never again have been mentioned in connection with that office." But by February 22, he seemed ready to accept the possibility of being nominated when he wrote to Miss Lane, "If it be the will of Providence to bestow upon me the Presidency, I shall accept it as a duty, a burden, & a trial, & not otherwise." However, he hurried to add, "I shall take no steps to obtain it." — For these letters, see Curtis, Life of James Buchanan, II, 155, 156, 164, 122, 166, as well as Moore, Works of James Buchanan, IX, 457-458, 465, 485; X, 41, 45, 59.
duties of the first position in the Republic, and who in all probability will occupy it before another convention shall assemble here. [Great applause] Need I say to you that the name of that distinguished man is James Buchanan.4

Needing no other cue, the Convention then proceeded to vote for their choice of Presidential candidate; in this balloting Buchanan received 126 of the 132 votes cast, with five of the remaining six going to George M. Dallas and the last one to the “Nominee of the National Convention.” In view of such near-unanimity, the Convention was moved to resolve

That unerring indications point to the Hon. James Buchanan—distinguished alike for his high personal character, his tried Democracy, his great abilities, experience and eminent statesmanship—as the nation’s choice for the office of President of the United States . . . .5

Lastly, the Convention instructed its delegates to the National Convention to use every effort to secure the nomination for Buchanan. To the Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, the city’s Republican newspaper, it appeared that the delegates were to have no second choice in the matter but were required to support Buchanan “first, last, and all the time.”6

The Gazette made the further point that the platform adopted by Pennsylvania’s Democrats was “all that South Carolina and the foreign allies of the democracy could desire.”

With such reports as these the Gazette and the Pittsburg Daily Dispatch relegated Buchanan’s proposed candidacy and the Pennsylvania Democratic Party to “back page” columns. The Gazette was content to note Buchanan’s return from England in April and to report briefly on the activities of the nation’s leading Democrats prior to their National Convention in June. Only in late April did it take several pot shots at Pennsylvania’s favorite son; by April 23 it was convinced that the leading objective of the Buchanan Democrats was “to convince the South that he [Buchanan] will descend as low at the feet of slavery as Pierce and Douglas, in the bid for Southern votes.”7 Further along this line, in an editorial on April 28, the Gazette was persuaded that Buchanan was “a leading candidate of the pro-slavery Democracy, and so embodying in himself all that is most obnoxious in Locofocoism, all that is most hateful in subserviency to the demands of slavery for the sake of spoils

4 Pittsburgh Morning Post, March 7, 1856. (Hereafter cited as Post)
5 Ibid.
6 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, March 11, 1856. (Hereafter cited as Gazette) The proceedings of this Convention are also reported in the Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch, March 5 (hereafter cited as Dispatch) and the Post, March 7.
and power of office.” The Dispatch seemed unconcerned with these political developments and waited until mid-May before it began to give reports on Buchanan’s movements, and then only as information preliminary to the Democratic National Convention.

In view of the Gazette’s Republican connections and the neutral position of the Dispatch, this limited coverage was to be expected. However, the Post was quick to take advantage of every opportunity to promote Buchanan’s candidacy. The tone of its overall effort was clearly set forth by its lead article on March 15, when it said,

We place at the head of our columns to-day the name of Pennsylvania’s choice, for the Presidency. We must submit to the will of the National Convention . . . but there is ample ground for strong confidence that the convention will nominate James Buchanan as the Democratic candidate for the Presidency. Never before was the choice of Pennsylvania so unanimous, so earnest, or so clearly entitled to the respect of the whole nation.

In fact, its arguments in Buchanan’s favor soon became the theme for many of those who supported him. Since Pennsylvania had never had a President and since no President had ever been elected to that office without the support of the Keystone State, it seemed quite obvious to the Post that this alone was sufficient justification. Yet this paper was wise enough to know that national political parties do not nominate their candidates on this point alone. The near-unanimity of Pennsylvania’s State Democratic Convention and the support already cast in Buchanan’s direction by other state’s Democratic organizations made him a candidate who could neither be deferred until a later election nor blocked by the existing two-thirds rule. But to the Post, even more prevailing reasons than these warranted Buchanan’s nomination. Their favorite ranked with the foremost men of the nation both in ability and statesmanship, for he was thoroughly acquainted with the duties of legislator and executive alike. Even more, he was well-known for his successes in the handling of our foreign relations, having served as Secretary of State and Minister to Russia and England. With all these recommendations in his support, it would have seemed unnecessary for the Post to say anything more. But there were two other facets of Buchanan’s makeup which this paper wanted entered on the record; as the pre-Convention campaign progressed these became familiar themes throughout the country. As it put it, the Post was sure that

8 Late in February it was already editorializing in favor of Buchanan when it called him “the favorite son of Pennsylvania.” Further, it predicted he would be the next President if nominated by the Party. — “James Buchanan,” Post, February 26, 1856.
“other good names may be before the” Convention, but Mr. Buchanan, in the present state of our affairs, is undoubtedly the most available and most unobjectionable.” Time after time the almost magical words “most available and most unobjectionable” were to mark the Post's support of Buchanan’s candidacy. It almost came to the point where many Pennsylvania Democrats felt confident their favorite could ride to the White House on nothing more than these two recommendations.

As soon as the Post had made its stand on Buchanan so clear to the people of Pittsburgh it then set out to promote his candidacy, in the process willingly taking on all comers who opposed or deprecated their man. Throughout March, April, and May, in fact right up to the National Convention, the Post took extraordinary pains to dramatize Buchanan’s nationwide popularity. No county caucus or small-town newspaper editorial in support of Buchanan was too insignificant to be overlooked and every trend or prediction in Buchanan’s favor was sure to be mentioned in its columns. When the Democratic Party lost New Hampshire’s gubernatorial race by only 116 votes earlier in the year, the Post was sure everything would be “all right by November,” so that New Hampshire could readily be “set down as sure for the Democratic candidate for President.” All that was needed to make the election of a Democratic President a certainty was a good candidate—and the Post expressed no doubts about Buchanan’s ability to fill the requirement. When the California Democratic Convention directed its delegates to cast a unanimous vote for Buchanan at the National Convention, the Post was quick to applaud the decision, declaring, “The Pacific State has done well.” Then, in keeping with its usual practice, the Post took advantage of this opportunity to say something more about Buchanan’s merits; it wrote,

Mr. Buchanan stands clear of all the late vexing controversies. He is unexceptionable in his moral character. His ability and statesmanship none can doubt. He is a national man equally acceptable to both North and South, and has always pursued a policy that stands clear of the effort to make a distinction between the different portions of the Confederacy.

Again, “the most available and the most unobjectionable”!

By mid-April, when the New York Sun (described as representative of the neutral press) came out in favor of Buchanan’s nomination, the Post was ready to persuade the people of Pittsburgh and Western

11 “California for Buchanan,” Post, April 3, 1856.
Pennsylvania that there was none like their man. He was “eminently a safe man” who, with his tremendous backlog of “experience, prudence, intelligence and sagacity” could carry the nation through any crisis, whether foreign or domestic in origin.\(^\text{12}\) Because the *Cincinnati Enquirer* looked on Buchanan as “the candidate for the times” and threw its support in his direction, the *Post* was sure the feeling in favor of Buchanan was “spreading, like fire upon the prairie, all over the country.” It cited newspaper editorials from all parts of the country to verify this—those from the *Fort Wayne* (Indiana) *Sentinel*, the *San Francisco Globe*, the *San Francisco Morning Herald*, the *Louisiana Courier*, and the *Philadelphia Ledger* are representative. Certainly if the *Post* was to have its way, Western Pennsylvania would know how the rest of the country felt about Buchanan.

Simultaneous with this positive approach to the problem, the *Post* also stood ready to answer the critics of the Democratic Party and James Buchanan through its columns. Because Pennsylvania’s Republicans and Know Nothings had purportedly spread predictions that Buchanan could never receive the Democratic nomination or possibly was not even a candidate, the *Post* described this as evidence of how much the opposition really dreaded Buchanan. This paper was sure that “with Buchanan as our standard-bearer they [the Republicans and Know Nothings] have no hope.”\(^\text{13}\) Early in April, when the opposition press began to attack Buchanan’s past experiences as a legislator and diplomat (one of the most vocal was an unidentified editor from Harrisburg), the *Post* of course replied. Buchanan was assailed for having voted for the protective tariff of 1842, but, to the *Post*, this was the best to be had at that time, so no damage could be done. He was accused of having opposed the extension of slavery in 1819, but this was excused as having been a “common crime” of which many men were guilty at the time. He was charged with having recommended “the stealing of Cuba”; this was justified by the *Post’s* claim that the possession of Cuba was essential to America’s safety and peace, and therefore should have been done, even if force had to be used.\(^\text{14}\)

Later, on two separate occasions in May, the *Boston Post* argued that a Presidential candidate ought to be selected because he supported great principles rather than simply because he was available; to this paper availability and the capacity to command votes were synonymous.

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12 “The Neutral Press and Mr. Buchanan,” *Post*, April 21, 1856.
13 “Presidential Candidates,” *Post*, March 26, 1856.
While the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* was perfectly in agreement that principle should never be sacrificed to popularity, it was sure that, other things being equal, it was proper for a political party to select as its candidate one who could poll the largest vote. With an eye to getting in the last word on the subject, the local paper claimed Buchanan's availability was an outgrowth of his "eminent fitness, capacity and character," all of which would "give to the democracy this year such a triumph as it never had before."15

Also during May, the *Washington Star* expressed its doubts about Buchanan's ability to carry even Pennsylvania during the campaign. The *Post* was positive he could win the state by at least 30,000 votes, and reaffirmed Pennsylvania's right to the Presidency by claiming, Pennsylvania must not be forever postponed. She has rights—she has a claim now. Now is her time; and while battling faithfully for the equal rights of all the other states, she will not forget nor forego her own rights.16

By now the *Post* had mentioned practically every conceivable reason for the nomination of Buchanan.

In the meantime, Buchanan had returned to the United States from his post in England, arriving in New York on April 23. After a short stay there, he went to his home near Lancaster by way of Philadelphia. Although he probably did not seek any of the fanfare that greeted him, he was received by large and enthusiastic crowds wherever he went.17

By late April he was at Wheatland and on May 8 received a committee of five from the Pennsylvania Democratic Convention. After a brief speech by George W. Brewer, of Franklin County, Buchanan answered and thanked the committee for the terms of the March 4 resolutions and expressed his satisfaction that "after a long course of public services, my public conduct has been approved by those to whom I am indebted . . . for all the offices and honors I have ever enjoyed."18

15 See the *Post*, May 13, 1856, and "Availability," *Post*, May 22, 1856.  
16 *Post*, May 17, 1856.  
17 A speech of Buchanan's at Baltimore on May 13 so annoyed the *Gazette* that it wrote, "If Mr. Buchanan has descended to such drivel as this, the Cincinnati Convention cannot kill him off too soon for his own good. It is hardly up to the dignity of the inane sputterings of the *Pittsburgh Post.*" — *Gazette*, May 14, 1856. For other comments from the *Gazette*, dated April 23 and April 28, see above.  
18 See *Post*, May 12, 1856; Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, II, 169-170; and Moore, *Works of James Buchanan*, X, 80. Both Curtis and Moore give June 8 as the date of this meeting but the *Post* clearly gives it as May 8. The earlier date is certainly the more logical.
the next several weeks he was to remain a spectator rather than a participant, avoiding even the Cincinnati Convention.\(^\text{19}\)

With the opening of the National Convention only a week away (it was to begin on June 2), the *Post* stepped up its campaign in support of Buchanan with a series of editorials during the week of May 26. The first, entitled “Mr. Buchanan’s Nomination,” was not only a summary of the reasons justifying his nomination but also an outright demand that he be nominated. There was no doubt in the *Post’s* mind that Buchanan could win the support of Democrats in every state; here was a case of the “voice and choice of the people” being made clear in advance of the nominating convention. A catalogue of Buchanan’s virtues, qualifications, and merits, incorporated into this editorial, reads like the record of “the perfect candidate.” No one could doubt his capacity, integrity, and fitness for the Presidency; he had been “long tried and never found wanting” in all assignments and responsibilities undertaken by him. Because of his long and varied experiences in government, he was well-known to the public. And yet, during all this time, no political offense could be “laid to his charge” nor had he committed any mistakes. It was obvious to this newspaper that “few public men have ever preserved so spotless a reputation as a man, or so clear a record as a statesman.” After this demonstration of their favorite’s personal and political virtues, the *Post* then launched into a full discussion of why 1856 was Mr. Buchanan’s and Pennsylvania’s “time.” Because of his age, he could not be put off for another four years (as had happened in 1852) and because Pennsylvania had been passed by so often there was no reason for it to be “patient and forebearing” any longer.\(^\text{20}\) Finally, after surveying the political horizon, the *Post* felt confident that “a triumph of our party and principles might be secured by placing in nomination the strongest and most available man.” Without question, the election of Buchanan “would settle forever the isms and issues that now agitate the country, and threaten its peace and security.”\(^\text{21}\) The next day, to develop this last point further, the *Post* claimed that Buchanan’s nomination by the Democratic party would

\(^{19}\) Rushmore G. Horton, *The Life and Public Services of James Buchanan*, New York, Derby & Jackson, 1856, pp. 399-402. This, of course, is a campaign biography, published shortly after the Cincinnati Convention.

\(^{20}\) On this point, the *Post* was willing to rescind the prevailing two-thirds rule should this be an obstacle to Buchanan’s nomination.

\(^{21}\) “Mr. Buchanan’s Nomination,” *Post*, May 26, 1856.
make all the “agitation about Kansas, about slavery, and about Senate fights” unnecessary; more than any other factor, his nomination would restore peace and quiet to the nation.\(^\text{22}\)

Later in the week, the Post felt compelled to show how Buchanan’s separation from such a question as slavery would be an advantage to the nation should he be nominated and elected. The country wanted quiet and “security from internal war and strife,” it explained, and should Buchanan be chosen as the Party’s candidate and elected, “the occupation of the agitators is gone . . . agitation will subside.”\(^\text{23}\)

By the Saturday just prior to the opening of the National Convention the Post was in a position to wind up its campaign with just one more editorial. Although it firmly appreciated the efforts of those who supported President Pierce, Stephen A. Douglas, and Lewis Cass for the nomination, it still held that

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\ldots \text{in our private judgment he [Buchanan] stands paramount to all objection and all opponents, and his defeat in the Convention would be felt as a stroke of injustice, which nothing but a love of our principles could endure, and an earnest desire for the safety, preservation and happiness of the Union and country, could prevent us from resenting.}
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But, in spite of this opposition, the Post defiantly announced that “a thousand guns of deep mouthed thunder are ready to reverberate the name of our Nestor when his star shall rise.”\(^\text{24}\)

The Cincinnati Convention, after having resolved the question of seating rival “Hard” and “Soft” delegations from New York (it admitted both and gave each delegate half a vote), reaffirmed the two-thirds rule,\(^\text{25}\) and adopted a platform, then began to vote on the four names entered in nomination. On the first ballot, cast on June 5, Buchanan held a slight lead but clearly lacked the necessary two-thirds majority:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Votes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Buchanan</td>
<td>135½</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franklin Pierce</td>
<td>122½</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephen A. Douglas</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lewis Cass</td>
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Throughout the remainder of the day and evening the balloting con-

\(^\text{22}\) “Our Nominee,” Post, May 27, 1856. The “Senate fights” referred principally to the attack on Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina on May 22. The “agitation about Kansas” was a kind way of describing such attacks as that on Lawrence, Kansas, on May 21.

\(^\text{23}\) Post, May 29, 1856.


\(^\text{25}\) The Buchanan forces were able to elect their choice, John E. Ward of Georgia, as permanent chairman and to get control of the committees in the process of organizing the convention. The Post had a correspondent at Cincinnati and printed the reports they received from him.
tinued, with Buchanan going as high as 155 on the sixth ballot and falling off to 142 on the ninth, finally ending at 152\(\frac{1}{2}\) on the fourteenth and last ballot of the day. Pierce's strength gradually fell off with each succeeding ballot to a low of 75, Douglas kept inching up to 63, and Cass ended an insignificant fourth at 51. On the following morning, practically all of Pierce's votes shifted to Douglas, so that the race in effect narrowed down to a choice between Buchanan and Douglas. After three ballots and after the Illinois delegation had read a letter of withdrawal from Douglas, Buchanan was unanimously nominated, this coming on the 17th ballot.\(^{26}\)

All three leading Pittsburgh newspapers made direct comment about this nomination. The Post wasted no time in raising "to our mast-head this morning" (June 7) the names of Buchanan and Breckenridge. Not only did it feel sure that the election of these two was "only a question of time" but it insisted "they are the right men for the right place."\(^{27}\) The following Monday, having had time to digest the events of the past week, it editorialized again, this time a little more expansively. It claimed the electoral vote of every state except Vermont and Massachusetts for the Democratic candidates; to the Post,

"The people have become tired and disgusted with the senseless agitation of demagogues. They want that peace and repose, that security and confidence of which Mr. Buchanan's name alone as a candidate is a sufficient guaranty. He is a Democrat of the Jefferson and Jackson school and the statesman who, through a long career of public and eminent services, has made no mistakes. He will be the next President.\(^{28}\"

The Dispatch looked rather favorably on the Cincinnati Convention's decision. It admitted it was "pleased and surprised" at the nomination of Buchanan and felt his selection was a step in the direction of destroying the two-thirds rule which, in its mind, had been "slaughtering the statesmen for the benefit of the fifth-rate men of the party." But the Dispatch was also interested in the course of action Pierce would follow over the next months. It was sure he would continue abusing the powers conferred on him by the people after which he would "sink into obscurity from which he was prematurely dragged thro the medium of the 'two-thirds rule'." On the basis of this paper's appraisal, the Democratic ticket appeared to be a strong one, one that

\(^{26}\) John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky was nominated for the Vice-Presidency after two ballots. There were ten nominees, all from the South, for this second place on the ticket.

\(^{27}\) "Our Nominees, Buchanan and Breckenridge," Post, June 7, 1856.

\(^{28}\) "Pennsylvania at Cincinnati," Post, June 9, 1856.
would “require union, and great care in the choice of candidates by its opponents, to defeat it.”

But the *Gazette* had yet to be heard from, and after waiting a discreet four days, finally took notice of Buchanan’s nomination. It was not much impressed with all the confident tones and “assembled enthusiasm” which had been coming from those who had advocated Buchanan’s nomination. Possibly because it was so firmly a Republican paper (it carried the Republican Declaration of Principles adopted by the Pittsburgh Convention on its masthead), the *Gazette* was rather positive that Buchanan and the Democratic Platform would be “very easy to beat.” Decrying the Platform as one which rested solidly on the extension of slavery, the *Gazette* delivered an almost-prophetic last word:

So . . . the doctrine of the extension of slavery in the territories, is supported by reason, tested by time, and is in consonance with the principles of Free Government. What next? What is the next plunge into the abyss of Doughface infamy?

29 *Dispatch*, June 7, 1856. On Sunday evening, June 8, Pittsburgh’s Democrats held a meeting at the American Hotel to ratify the National Convention’s decisions. According to the *Dispatch*, a large crowd attended and, along with the rapid booming of the cannon on the hill above the city, the “spirited addresses filled the multitude with enthusiasm, and frequent cheers and huzzas burst forth from the assembled Democracy.” *Dispatch*, June 9, 1856.