Although James Buchanan is the only native-born Pennsylvanian to serve his country "in the highest office in the gift of the people," practically no work has been done to demonstrate the reaction of Pennsylvania's western counties to his candidacy, campaign, and eventual election. Among the fifteen counties along the western strip, nine cast Republican majorities in the 1856 Presidential election, five cast Democratic majorities, and one a Democratic plurality; over-all the total Republican vote exceeded the Democratic by only about 8,500 out of the almost 105,000 votes cast for these two parties. In view of the closeness, one could logically expect a variety of editorial opinion about Buchanan and the Democratic Party among representative newspapers from these counties.

During the weeks before March 4, 1856, when the Pennsylvania Democratic State Convention met at Harrisburg, only occasional attention was given to the jockeying going on in the national political arena. More than any other, the *Erie Gazette* was interested in these preliminaries and did not hesitate to throw some well-aimed barbs at the Democrats. On January 3, it launched this campaign by hitting at both Douglas and Buchanan. The editors described Douglas as not wanting to stand in the way of anyone else for the nomination, not only because he was too modest for that but also because he was sick—a throat that was sore ever since he had advocated the Nebraska bill. In contrast, it believed Buchanan was "quite willing to try his heels," this a somewhat different course from that previously steered by him. The *Gazette* nicely explained this alteration in attitude with the words—"Distance may lend enchantment to the view"—alluding to Buchanan's current assignment as Minister to Great Britain. But with tongue in cheek, it

* Dr. Carlson, an Assistant Professor of History in the University of Pittsburgh, read this paper on October 27, 1956, at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association held at York. This article is an enlargement of his "Pittsburgh Newspaper Reaction to James Buchanan and the Democratic Party in 1856" which appeared in volume 39, number 2 of this magazine.

still asked, "Which shall it be?" but then quickly added, "Don't all speak at once."²

Two weeks later it openly challenged its neighbor, the *Erie Weekly Observer*, to take a stand on the several candidates; this the latter promptly did. The *Observer* announced in no uncertain terms, "We support Mr. Buchanan because we believe him to be a Democrat, and as such, is willing the people, who emigrate to Kansas . . . shall decide the question of slavery . . . as to them seems best. That is Democracy, as we understand it, in its broadest sense."³ The *Gazette* got what it wanted and throughout late January and February did its best to bait the *Observer* by berating the "House of Lancaster" and belittling the Democratic Party's chances in November. Even though the *Gazette* recognized Buchanan as the one most likely to be nominated by the Democrats, it had decided in the meantime, " . . . it matters little who is nominated." It based this on the belief that the Anti-Administration party would bring out a candidate "of the right stamp" who would be concerned with the welfare of both North and South alike and who would decidedly oppose "aggressive Human Slavery."⁴ Certainly Sterrett and Gara, the *Gazette*'s editors, revealed more than an average amount of political acumen in tying the campaign to its one major issue—that of slavery extension.

In Pittsburgh, only the *Morning Post* devoted any considerable space to the early season maneuvering; with some forthrightness it announced itself firmly and squarely in Buchanan's camp. The *Post*, in its lead editorial of February 26, called Buchanan "the favorite son of Pennsylvania"; further it was sure he could "poll an unprecedented large vote in the old Keystone State" not only because his principles were well-known but also, and this was important, because he stood clear of "many of the recent disturbing issues." All these made one thing clear to the *Post*: "He will be the next President if nominated."⁵

When the Democratic State Convention met, it gave 126 of its 132 votes to Buchanan and thereby instructed Pennsylvania's delegates to the Cincinnati Convention to use every means to win the nomination for him. Naturally, the Democratic newspapers were delighted with the

² "For the Presidency," *Erie Gazette*, January 3, 1856.
³ "Once for All," *Erie Weekly Observer*, January 19, 1856. (Hereafter cited as *Erie Observer*).
⁵ "James Buchanan," *Pittsburgh Morning Post*, February 26, 1856. (Hereafter cited as *Pittsburgh Post*).
outcome. The *Pittsburgh Post* headlined its lead editorial of Marsh 15 "James Buchanan" and placed his name at the head of its column. To justify its stand, it claimed it had taken into consideration the unanimity of Pennsylvania's choice, the fact that the State was entitled to a candidate after sixty-seven years of Presidential elections, and the belief that Buchanan was "the most available and the most unobjectionable" of all possible candidates.6

Although somewhat more subdued in its presentation, the *Crawford Democrat* was equally as pleased with the Convention's action. Because it had supported Buchanan for the Presidency for eighteen years, it raised his name to the head of its column "with great pleasure." It too followed a pattern of justification that was common with other Democratic organs—it noted Buchanan's "eminent ability and his great moral worth" and it observed that the Presidency was an honor "justly due to the Keystone State."7 Of course, the *Erie Observer* joined the move to congratulate Pennsylvania's standard bearer. In its words, "Mr. Buchanan is a wise and cautious statesman, as well as an experienced politician. No other man who has been so much in action on the public stage of life, who has mingled so much in the turmoil of partisan warfare as Mr. Buchanan, can point to a history so free from blemish, to a career so brilliant with points of patriotic interest." Then, with a flourish, the *Observer* claimed, "Mr. Buchanan has never yet made one [a blunder] in his long public career. He is too wise—too circumspect."8

With this kind of bait, the Anti-Administration editors could hardly fail to reply. The *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette* sneered at the Convention because it had given its delegates no second choice of nominee — "... they must be for Buchanan first, last and all the time," it wrote. But the platform adopted at Harrisburg was even more galling to this paper—it "... is all that South Carolina and the foreign allies of the democracy could desire."9 In a similar vein, the *Warren Mail* observed that the policies of the Pierce Administration would be continued for another four years if the Democrats won in 1856. Should this hap-

6 The editors portrayed Buchanan as "... a member of Congress, Senator, Secretary of State and Foreign Minister" who "has ranked with the foremost men of this nation in ability and statesmanship; and is thoroughly conversant with the duties of all branches of our public service and all the details of our foreign relations."
7 "Our Ticket," *Crawford Democrat*, March 11, 1856.
8 "Buchanan and Dallas," *Erie Observer*, April 5, 1856.
9 *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 11, 1856. (Hereafter cited as *Pittsburgh Gazette*).
pen, the Mail considered the ruin of the nation as inevitable and looked on civil war and a "most fearful carnage" as a distinct likelihood. As if to predict the future, and this with an air of finality, the Mail warned, "In the election of Buchanan on a Democratic platform, we would have nothing to hope, and much to fear." Like the others, the Washington Weekly Reporter shadow boxed with the Harrisburg platform, particularly because it endorsed the Pierce Administration and the Nebraska bill. The Reporter's most telling blow was one thrown in disgust, when it said, referring to the platform, "... it is not to be wondered at, as Democracy must sustain the actions of its men; be they good, bad, or indifferent."

Between the State and National Democratic Conventions the various editors continued their war of words, with the Democratic Party, its expected platform, and its several leading candidates each coming for a share of the praise and criticism. On occasion, as if to vary the approach, the editors battled one another. Most outspoken in its support of Buchanan and regular in its reports was the Pittsburgh Post. On March 24 it launched its own campaign by telling its readers, "The People have evidently got tired of the isms. They want principles—a settled and national policy; and they are coming up most encouragingly to the support of the only party that has them. The current runs strongly in favor of the Democracy now." Two days later, the Post went so far as to boast that both Republicans and Know-Nothings dreaded "the very name of James Buchanan." As evidence of this fear, it claimed the opposition presses were "diligently circulating predictions, rumors, calculations" to demonstrate that Buchanan could not receive the nomination. But these efforts, rather than being the fact, were "the devices of those who have but little hope in any event, and none if James Buchanan is the Democratic candidate."

By the middle of April, some of the other papers had joined in the game, particularly those that had some ax to grind. The Erie Gazette "gave up" on Buchanan when it learned he believed the Nebraska bill was the only basis on which the slavery-extension question could be settled. For the purposes of argument, the Gazette declared war on Pennsylvania's favorite and did not waste any words—to it, Buchanan was

12 "Presidential Candidates," Pittsburgh Post, March 26, 1856.
committed "... to the policy of PIERCE, DOUGLAS, ACHISON, and the 'Border Ruffians' generally [which] put him beyond the hope of redemption. He has thrown himself fell swoop into the arms of the South, swallowing all their doctrines and endorsing all their aggressions, and there let him remain. 'Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone'." With the same object in view but using more deliberate and well-chosen words, the Warren Mail also struck at Buchanan's stand on slavery extension. To it, if Buchanan was going to be the "exponent of Democracy," the people of America would witness another Pierce in the White House who would be "the foe of humanity and freedom for the territories, and the hope of Slavery extension and Slavery dominion. . . ."  

None of the papers was more straightforward in criticizing Buchanan and his party than the Pittsburgh Gazette. This paper, which daily ran the "Republican Declaration of Principles Adopted by the Pittsburgh Convention" at the head of its columns, took great delight in embarrassing its opponents. On April 23 it decided that the leading object of the Buchanan Democrats of Pennsylvania was to convince the South that their favorite would descend as low at the feet of slavery as Pierce and Douglas in his bid for Southern votes. Five days later, it sarcastically informed its readers, "Mr. Buchanan at this moment definitely stands before the country as 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 and power of office. . . ." Then, after Buchanan had returned from London and made speeches in several Eastern cities, the Gazette decided it was time to offer some advice to the Democrats—"If Mr. Buchanan has descended to such drivel as this, the Cincinnati Convention cannot kill him off too soon for his own good." But the Pittsburgh Post naturally saw these speeches in a different light; it believed "... as long as we act on such great and glorious principles [as Buchanan gave them in one speech in Philadelphia dealing with foreign policy], we are sure always to be in the right."  

13 "We Give Him Up," Erie Gazette, April 10, 1856.  
14 "Modern Democracy," Warren Mail, April 19, 1856.  
15 "The Ebo-shin Democracy," Pittsburgh Gazette, April 23, 1856. The item of April 28 was a part of an editorial decrying the support given Buchanan by the North American, an old Whig newspaper in Philadelphia.  
16 Pittsburgh Gazette, May 14, 1856; Pittsburgh Post, April 29, 1856.
Just before the Cincinnati Convention met, the Crawford Democrat introduced another subject in its columns, of interest in 1856 but perhaps even moreso because of its parallel a century later—a Presidential candidate's health, in this instance, Buchanan's. Buchanan had taken many opportunities, both in speeches and letters, to comment on his age and health and their relation to the Presidency. In one of these speeches, just before going abroad in 1853, he told guests at an informal dinner in Washington, "...it is a melancholy spectacle to see old men struggling in the political arena for the honors and offices of this world, as though it were to be their everlasting abode." He dwelt on this same subject a year later in a letter to his good friend, John Thomson Mason; here he wrote, "...I was 63 years of age on the 23d April last, & should I be elected President, I would be nearly three score & ten before the completion of the term. ...the Presidency ... is a crown of thorns... it is not worth what it costs. Its labors & anxieties have become so great as to destroy the best constitutions of younger men than myself." By the end of 1855, however, he was caught between the realities of his health and an ambition to become President. This time he wrote from London to Miss Harriet Lane, "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." Perhaps James E. McFarland, editor of the Crawford Democrat, wanted only to assure his readers of Buchanan's good health and fine physical condition when he pictured Buchanan on May 13 as "...a hale, vigorous man, and although he does not still possess the elasticity and strength of manhood, his physical powers have not suffered so much as might have been expected from the encroachment of age. All his friends say—and they certainly ought to know—that he never looked better."
When Buchanan and John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky were nominated by the Democrats at Cincinnati, the newspapers of Pennsylvania's western strip reacted in keeping with their political slant. Again pro-Democratic papers such as the *Pittsburgh Post*, the *Crawford Democrat*, and the *Erie Observer* were among the first to proclaim the good news. The *Post*, without waiting, called Buchanan and Breckenridge "Our Nominees" and claimed, "Never was a nomination more promptly and cordially responded to all over the land. . . ." Further, it expected every state except Vermont and Massachusetts to cast its electoral vote for the Democratic ticket, primarily because Buchanan offered peace and repose along with security and confidence. In contrast and perhaps because it knew the Democratic ticket would have a hard time winning its county, the *Crawford Democrat* was primarily interested in the local effect of the nominations. It reported to its readers, with an obvious effort to persuade them, "We never saw so much interest manifested to know the decision of a National Convention. . . . In our own county . . . hundreds will now flock to the Democratic standard who have recently faltered, and we confidently hope to record an old fashioned Democratic majority in November. . . ."21 Sloan & Moore of the *Erie Observer*, could not find words enough to praise the nominees; in fact, they appeared to deliver the equivalent of a sermon for their lead editorial. Starting with the belief that the people knew Buchanan could ". . . never lend himself to the mad ambition that seeks to divide the Union by exciting sectional jealousies, and creating factional animosities," the *Observer* preached that only Buchanan could unite so "many elements of the glorious Past with the high and holy aspirations that crowd upon the mind in contemplating the promising Future."22

21 "The Nominations," *Crawford Democrat*, June 10, 1856. Apparently McFarland could not contain his enthusiasm. In this lead editorial, he continued his praise of the nomination of Buchanan: "Our friends were all joyous—all breathed freer, believing the great battle was safe in the future with Pennsylvania's favorite son for our standard-bearer. The Democracy will now go into the contest with cheerful spirits and buoyant hopes. We have a candidate of whom the State is justly proud."

22 "The Nominations: Buchanan and Breckenridge!" *Erie Observer*, June 14, 1856.
As one might expect, the papers with an Anti-Administration editorial page found it difficult to swallow all this. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* at first thought both Buchanan and the Democratic ticket would "be very easy to beat," but later it reversed its field. After some serious consideration, it looked for "one of the closest and best contested struggles ever seen" in the state. In spite of this indecision, it bluntly announced on June 11, "... we intend to contest the election with Mr. Buchanan in his own State, and ... we intend to use all honorable means to defeat him. Although a Pennsylvanian, he stands on a platform opposed to the honor, the welfare, the liberty, and the integrity of this State, and in that position he is unworthy of the suffrages of her people."23 This was a clear-cut declaration of war.

In somewhat of a no man's land between the extremities of the city's *Post* and the *Gazette*, Pittsburgh's official paper, the *Daily Dispatch*, announced it was both pleased with and surprised at the Democratic Party's nominations. However, its pleasure stemmed more from the fact that Buchanan was a Pennsylvanian than from an endorsement of the Party's principles. Likewise, it looked favorably on the selection of Breckenridge, but again only because he was the least of several evils when compared with others, such as John A. Quitman or Jefferson Davis, who could have received the nomination. It judiciously summed up its position with a statement that could well have been studied by Republicans and Know-Nothings alike—"The ticket is certainly a strong one—and it will require union, and great care in the choice of candidates by its opponents, to defeat it."24

Elsewhere those papers supporting the Republican Party attacked Buchanan and the opposition party from a variety of vantage points. The *Beaver County Argus* called Buchanan a man of little force of character who had been floating on the party current and was seeking only "the place of greatest political safety" as his destination. Perhaps among all the papers in the Western counties the *Argus* came closer than any in spotlighting one of Buchanan's most glaring weaknesses—"It is not, nor will it be alleged by us, that he is a bad man, but his antecedents prove him too weak to defend, long, his own views. It has almost become a constitutional habit, with him, to waive them and adopt those

24 *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, June 7, 1856.
of his political fellows, when his own or the interests of his party require it.”

Other editors played the same game in dwelling on Buchanan’s shortcomings in their lead editorials following the June nominations. The Warren Mail described the Democratic candidate as a man of unexceptional character but not of first class ability.” Because it thought of him as “careful, politic and pliable,” the Mail decided that Buchanan “never was and never will be a real leader,” primarily because of these faults. In the Mail’s opinion, Buchanan had “been on about all sides of all questions and all parties. . . .”

Again it was the Erie Gazette, among all the Republican sheets, that showed the most skill in extending left-handed compliments to the opposition. It called Buchanan “. . . a gentleman of admitted moral worth and intellectual ability . . . [whose] private character . . . is fair, while his talents and acquirements are, at least, very respectable.” But this was enough by way of praise for the Gazette. It too looked on the Democratic candidate as a “timid, time-serving politician, usually exhibiting a want of boldness and nerve. . . .”

Although slavery extension was the central question in the campaign (and got most of the editorial space in the sheets), other issues were discussed. In one instance, Buchanan gave the Republican papers some ready-made ammunition. Just a few days after the nominating convention adjourned, Buchanan made a speech in which he identified himself with the platform recently drafted; he said, “I have been placed upon a platform of which I most heartily approve, and that can speak for me. Being the representative of the great Democratic party, and not simply James Buchanan, I must square my conduct according to the platform of that party, and insert no new plank, nor take one from it.” The Pittsburgh Gazette was infuriated. It called the pronouncement “too explicit for doubt” and painted Buchanan in the worst light possible — “the mere creature of the party which nominated him,” and again, “the obedient tool of the Slavocracy which dictated the platform,” and finally

25 “The Democratic Nominee,” Beaver County Argus, June 18, 1856.
26 “Democratic Nominations,” Warren Mail, June 14, 1856.
27 “Democratic Nominees,” Erie Gazette, June 12, 1856. Sterrett and Gara told their readers that they opposed Buchanan “. . . for the reason that his course and policy met the approbation of neither our judgment nor conscience.”
"a man changed into a thing, a thing to be used and trampled upon." 28

The Daily Commercial Journal of Pittsburgh made its voice heard by calling this speech "one of the most fatal mistakes ever made by a politician." The same sentiments were expressed by the Warren Mail which now referred to Buchanan as "a black cockade old Federal fogey who has not a drop of Democratic blood in his veins." 29

From time to time the several newspapers introduced other elements from Buchanan's past and present, in some cases to support him, in others to condemn him. There was the perplexing question whether he was a national or a sectional nominee; naturally the Democratic organs supported the former view. The Pittsburgh Post wrote, "No fault can be found with him, except that he is a national man in principles . . . he will stand by the Union and the Constitution, and all the best interests of his whole country." But the Warren Mail and the Washington Reporter saw it in a different light. The Mail insisted that Buchanan owed his nomination to the South and, if elected, would owe that election to the South; in its opinion, "He is now bound hand and foot to the Slave-breeding interest and can not resist it if he would." The Reporter was even more positive; it claimed, " . . . if Mr. Buchanan is not a sectional candidate we are very much at a loss where to look for one." 30

Buchanan's past came back to plague him on more than one occasion during the campaign. Because he had made a speech on July 4, 1815, in which he said, " . . . we ought to drive from our shores foreign influences and cherish exclusively American feeling . . . ," the Washington Reporter called him the oldest living Know-Nothing. His supposed role in the "bargain and sale" slander involving Henry Clay and the Presidency in 1824 was frequently cast up to him, but because no

28 "The Issue as Presented by Mr. Buchanan," Pittsburgh Gazette, June 14, 1856; and again on June 23, 1856. The Gazette did not stop with just this; it further insisted " . . . men have looked upon Mr. Buchanan as something besides a partizan, turn away with disgust from the subservient instrument of that same Oligarchy which has rendered the Administration of Franklin Pierce a by-word and a reproach. The open avowals of the Democratic candidate show the boldness and confidence of our adversaries, but we trust that the effect will be a closer union of all their opponents, and a determined and vigorous effort to give success to the Right. If we unite our broken ranks, and strike for Freedom and Humanity, the cause of our country will be gloriously triumphant." This editorial was copied by the Washington Reporter in its issue of July 16, 1856.
30 "A Pennsylvania President," Pittsburgh Post, July 10, 1856; "Mr. Buchanan and the South," Warren Mail, August 30, 1856; Washington Reporter, June 25, 1856.
one could come to any valid conclusions about it, it meant little more than another subject for argument. Next, while speaking in the Senate on January 22, 1840, Buchanan made a statement regarding the wages of labor which was construed by some papers as favoring ten cents as the wage for a day's work; from this came the "Ten-Cent Jimmy" nickname that stuck with him during the campaign. The *Washington Reporter* was sufficiently rankled over the 54°40' or fight issue in Oregon to deride it as one of the many brilliant examples of Buchanan's diplomacy. It insisted that in January, 1846, Buchanan had declared for all of Oregon but when the slaveholding South deplored the possibility of war over the boundary line, he then retreated and subsequently proceeded to "completely fizzle out." Because of his role in framing and adhering to the Ostend Manifesto in 1854, the *Pittsburgh Gazette* could readily see the United States carrying out a "ruffian policy" in robbing Spain of Cuba and involving this nation in war "with half the world" should Buchanan be elected.31

There was a lighter side to the campaign as well. Some papers portrayed Buchanan as a great benefactor of his fellow man while others claimed just the opposite. The *Pittsburgh Post* reminded its readers of Buchanan's $500 gift to Pittsburgh in 1845 for the relief of the sufferers from the great fire and his donation of $4,000 to the city of Lancaster in 1849 "for the relief of poor and indigent females." To this paper, "such is the man that the black republicans malign and slander and would consign to infamy. . . ."32 But the *Pittsburgh Gazette* wanted its subscribers to remember how Buchanan bought votes in Lancaster by being a "hail fellow well met" and by leaving ten dollars on the bar to buy drinks for the house. Again, it quoted from a letter of 1846 in which Buchanan denied being a resident of Lancaster at the time (ostensibly to avoid certain personal taxes levied there); it wondered ". . . if a man who thus sneaks off from the payment of his just taxes" could properly call on voters to support him on the basis of state pride.33

After the usual pleas for getting out the vote, warnings against frauds, calls to the "Buck and Breck" Clubs and the Fremont Clubs to form Vigilance Committees to keep unauthorized persons from the polls,

31 "54° 40' or Fight!" *Washington Reporter*, August 13, 1856; "The Highwaysman's Plea!" *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 30, 1856.
32 "Buchanan and Pittsburgh," *Pittsburgh Post*, June 14, 1856; "Buchanan's Charities," September 1, 1856.
most of the papers made their pre-election predictions and waited for the results. When it became evident not only that Buchanan had carried Pennsylvania (he polled 230,700 votes out of 460,386, the remainder split between Fremont and Fillmore) but also had won the election, each paper gave appropriate editorial space in proportion to its politics. The Crawford Democrat called it "a glorious victory" and the Pittsburgh Post guaranteed its readers that "peace will reign while he bears rule" and further plugged the theme that Buchanan's Administration would become one of justice and honor as well as of peace and prosperity.34 The Erie Observer could not contain its joy; topping its lead editorial of November 8 were five banner headlines—"Let the Bird Fly," "The Great and Glorious Result," "Truth and Justice have Triumphed," "The Union and Constitution have been Sustained," "Buchanan Is Elected by the People." To the Observer, the election results were sure to "send a thrill of pleasure and exultation to the heart of every National man. . . ."

On the other side, there was little praise or applause. The Erie Gazette predicted Buchanan would pursue a vacillating course between the extremes represented by Jefferson Davis on the one hand and Stephen A. Douglas on the other. In contrast, the Beaver Argus expected little more than a policy in strict conformity with the South's demands; further it was sure Kansas would be admitted as a slave state and then Cuba annexed for more slave states. By way of emphasis, the Pittsburgh Gazette wondered "what Mr. Buchanan will make against the Southern fire-eaters who have him in hand." Significantly this sheet was one of the few that made any real effort to explain the election results; it was pertinent both in 1856 as it was again a century later:

The Democratic leaders simply saw what was patent to every vision, that these [Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana] were the three doubtful States of the north, and they concentrated their efforts accordingly. In this they differed from our own leaders, including those who had the management of the National Campaign, who were so blind as not to be able to see this plain fact. They stubbornly refused to regard Pennsylvania as the battle-field, and wasted their efforts on States which did not need them.35

Finally, better than any other, the Daily Commercial Journal saw this election in its true light. Admitting that the anti-Slavery forces had lost for the moment, but sure that their principles were undying, the Journal

34 "Pennsylvania," Pittsburgh Post, November 7, 1856.
rightly reasoned that a blow had been struck “. . . which begins a war that cannot cease to wage until Slavery shall be forever excluded from the National Territories.”