

James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Challenging the Traditional View of Buchanan

James Buchanan is usually ranked in the lowest tier of presidents by historians and political scientists who care about those types of things. Most Americans probably could not recall anything about him, and if they did, it would likely only be his role in the secession crisis of 1860-61.

But there is more to Buchanan than just the secession crisis, and even that period of his administration is little understood by non-Civil War experts. John Quist and Michael Birkner's co-edited volume of essays attempts to provide a more comprehensive, better balanced assessment of Buchanan's presidency. After the book's introduction places Buchanan in historiographical context and explains the origins of the volume, the ten contributors address both well-known episodes and themes, as well as those that have not received as much attention by the scholarly community. The result is a portrait of the fifteenth president that acknowledges his weaknesses and shortcomings, yet also recognizes that his failures were not universal.

William P. MacKinnon and John M. Belohlavek address two overlooked topics among most historians: Buchanan's relations with the Mormons and his foreign policy. MacKinnon makes it clear that not all of Buchanan's decisions regarding the Mormons were poorly made, yet the bad certainly seems to outweigh the good. He failed to inform Utah's territorial governor (and Mormon leader) Brigham Young, for example, that Alfred Cumming was replacing him, even though the media were already reporting the news. This delay allowed Young to prepare Mormons to push back against the military force that Buchanan sent to ensure a peaceful transition. Buchanan's actions during the Mormon War also encouraged criticism from both Mormons and Republicans that the president was using the crisis to line the pockets of his supporters,

including Secretary of War John B. Floyd. The taint of corruption only added to the perception that Buchanan lacked leadership. Belohlavek takes a more positive view of Buchanan's foreign policy decisions, arguing that "his policies, actions, and sound judgment often benefited the nation" and even his failures "reflected a genuine and realistic concern for American security and commercial goals that would be pursued by later administrations" (112). For example, even though he supported slavery's expansion, Buchanan tried to eliminate the filibustering missions that threatened to destabilize Latin American nations and harm U.S. economic opportunities among them.

Paul Finkelman's chapter tackles one of the main criticisms of Buchanan: his unwillingness to allow Congress to regulate slavery in West. Finkelman focuses on the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision of 1857, and while he does not believe that a conspiracy existed between the executive and legislative branches, he does endorse the idea that "the new president corruptly used insider knowledge to endorse the decision before it was announced" (38). Buchanan's deference to the Taney court on the question of slavery's westward expansion into U.S. territory "ran counter to the entire political history of the United States up to that point" (26). Nicole Etcheson argues that while Buchanan's absence from the U.S. political scene during the nullification crisis and the Bank War left him "out of touch . . . With the concerns of a new political generation," he was not unaware of the slavery issue (90). Buchanan served as James K. Polk's secretary of state during the Mexican-American War and had endorsed applying the Missouri Compromise line to the territory that the U.S. gained from Mexico via the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. When Democrats nominated him in 1856, however, Buchanan was forced to support the idea of popular sovereignty regarding slavery in the territories, even though it was not his preferred course of action. His insistence that the North, not the South, was the threat to national unity only poisoned the political water and provided a precedent against which antislavery northerners judged his later actions during the secession crisis. Michael A. Morrison's examination of Buchanan's leadership echoes Etcheson's in some ways. He argues that Buchanan thought primarily in partisan terms. This determination failed to account for the sectional rancor that was consuming the nation, and it also added to the perception of corruption within the Democratic party.

The later chapters by Jean H. Baker, William G. Shade, and Daniel W. Crofts primarily address the secession crisis. Instead of representing the interests of the entire Union, Baker believes that Buchanan was influenced significantly

by pro-southern advisors, including cabinet members, who confirmed his own pro-southern sympathies. He was, in her words, "the most dangerous of chief executives: a stubborn mistaken ideologue whose principles held no room for compromise" (181). Some historians might disagree with Shade's claim that the northern public "did not have a good idea of what was happening" and northern politicians "did not grasp the gravity of the situation," but he provides a helpful overview of the different northern perspectives on the secession crisis through the views of Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, William H. Seward, and Thaddeus Stevens (194). Crofts uses Joseph J. Holt, Buchanan's former postmaster general who assumed the secretary of war position between January and March 1861, to argue that Holt's response to the secession crisis, which historians generally applaud, closely paralleled that of his oft-criticized chief" (209). He credits both Holt and Buchanan for trying to avoid war. In fact, Crofts suggests that "[o]n the whole, Buchanan made as capable an effort to accomplish the impossible as Lincoln did during the latter's first month-plus in office" (230).

In addition to a sympathetic epilogue by Birkner, also included is an edited exchange between William W. Freehling and Michael F. Holt from the conference that spawned the volume. This conversation alone is worth picking up the book. One example from each historian gives a sense of their respective views. Holt reminded audience members that up until that point, Congress had used political compromises to solve issues that threatened the Union, a fact on which Buchanan was depending. The reality, though, according to Holt, was that some southern states were unwilling to recognize Lincoln's election. This "was not a congressional problem, it was something else" (255). In responding to an audience member's question about the economic influence on the coming of the Civil War, Freehling argued that separating slavery from economics was impossible because "[t]he continuation of slavery was, among other things, the nation's most important economic issue" (257).

As someone who teaches courses on both the Civil War and the American presidency, I found these essays very useful in refining my view of Buchanan. I am still not sure that he does not belong in the lowest tier of presidents, but the contributors may have finally convinced me that he ranks higher than U.S. Grant.

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