

“Buchanan’s Civil War,” delivered at Wheatland, September 20, 2005

History comes most alive in dramatic moments, moments that capture the beginning or perhaps the end of some national tragedy or war, or that move us in ways we had not really anticipated. We have all seen, and many of us vividly recall, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Day of Infamy Speech” from newsreels. John F. Kennedy’s “Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You” phrase in his inaugural address, Ronald Reagan’s eloquent remarks after the Challenger Disaster, George Bush standing arm in arm with the firemen in New York city several days after 9/11. These are dramatic moments now indelibly part of our national memory.

Because radio and television did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot capture and replay dramatic moments of history in the same way. We can only imagine them—for example, George Washington’s response to the Whiskey Rebels of 1794, or Andrew Jackson on his sickbed in 1832 when the Senate rechartered the Bank of the United States and he vowed to “kill” the bank even though it had tried to “kill” him. Like Abraham Lincoln’s appearance and brief speech in Gettysburg in November 1863, these were dramatic moments that we can imaginatively reconstruct but not directly visualize.

Good historians help reconstruct historical dramas. For example, Philip Klein’s evocative prologue to his 1962 book, President James Buchanan, does this for James Buchanan as a large Confederate army entered Pennsylvania in 1863. In his prize-winning biography, Klein employs novelistic techniques to capture—to imagine--the scene on the Marietta Pike in late June 1863.

Press reports told of 35,000 Confederate troops in York, another southern army moving in on Harrisburg, and a physical encounter between Confederate troops and local militia near Wrightsville. The river bridge spanning Columbia and Wrightsville was, according to these reports, on fire. Was that in fact the case? People could not discount it. And was it possible Lee's army could cross the Susquehanna River at another point? Was Lancaster going to face the wrath of the Confederate Army, as citizens of the Shenandoah Valley had faced repeated assaults from Union forces? Would the former U.S. president who lived on the edge of Lancaster, here at Wheatland, be the target of retribution?

Klein's re-creation of the moment poses questions that could have occurred to James Buchanan, even as his ears burned with vicious taunts by Republicans that they hoped if the Confederates came through Lancaster they would "burn you like they did Thad Stevens" at his Iron foundry in Caledonia. "Would Wheatland be standing in a week's time, or would it rest in ashes? Would he be alive or dead," or taken prisoner as a kind of "ridiculous trophy" of war? According to the omniscient author, Buchanan did not know, and he really did not care. He would stay in Lancaster, along with his trusted housekeeper, "Miss Hetty" Parker. He did not care how many rebels came, nor what the consequences might be. He and "Miss Hetty" would "see it through together."

On that anxious day, June 28, 1863, Buchanan's head filled with thoughts about his life, about his country, about the symbolic meaning of the Columbia-Wrightsville bridge's burning. He had tried to bridge the North and the South all his political career. But, as Klein puts it, "the bridge was burning now, ruined as completely as his own life's work." It almost did not matter that he was in a kind of exile in Wheatland, that, contrary

to his hopes, his name was “one for people to curse and spit at, north and south,” as Klein observes.

The original title of Phil Klein’s book on Buchanan—a title the Pennsylvania State Press forced him to alter—was “Cursed are the Peacemakers.” Doubtless that is how James Buchanan viewed his lot in a life devoted to public service.

And yet, there were consolations. The bridge on the Susquehanna had indeed burned; but the Confederates did not make it to Lancaster. Wheatland was saved, as was little Franklin & Marshall College around the corner, and the city proper. Nor did the Rebels prevail in the momentous battle in Gettysburg that some historians say tipped the scales in the Civil War. The Union lines at Cemetery Ridge held firm on July 3. Buchanan could take solace in that. And not only that. The Union to which James Buchanan had devoted his career in public service, would not remain divided, though the struggle was still on and the outcome, in 1863, uncertain.

Living in retirement at Wheatland during the war years and beyond, James Buchanan had an opportunity to reflect on both current affairs and his historical role. Contrary to the imaginative reconstruction provided by Philip Klein, in which Buchanan thinks about the tragedy of a broken Union, during these years in retirement he banished all thoughts of failure and even of error. Looking back, looking forward, he blotted out the negative and stressed the positive.

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If James Buchanan uttered any memorable line during the Civil War era, it was doubtless the one he expressed to Abraham Lincoln on inauguration day, March 4, 1861.

“My dear sir, if you are as happy in entering the White House as I shall feel on returning to Wheatland, you are a happy man indeed.”

Like many other retired presidents, Buchanan happily returned home, to renew acquaintance with friends and neighbors, and to focus on pleasant pursuits, less stressful than running a country in a turbulent era. Although he could not look forward to a lucrative book contract, seats on corporate boards, or the chance to earn large speaking fees, as some former presidents have since done, Buchanan’s situation in 1861 was not as dire as other ex-presidents. While Wheatland needed some serious attention and rehabilitation, which Buchanan intended to oversee, his personal finances were not nearly so precarious as those of Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe upon leaving the White House. His health was not as damaged as James K. Polk’s had been by the arduous demands of the job.

One of our oldest presidents—nearing 70 upon his retirement--Buchanan actually left the White House in better physical shape than he entered it. This is not hard to appreciate, given his affliction in March of 1857 with what Roy F. Nichols has called “National Hotel disease.” Departing Washington after Lincoln’s inauguration, Buchanan was escorted home by a Lancaster citizens’ committee. He made a well-received speech during a stop in Baltimore; then, as he arrived home, he briefly addressed a military company that escorted him into his domicile. According to one contemporary account, Buchanan “regretted that having just reached his home, he was not prepared to entertain them. The doors of his house had been always open, the latch-string was out. At any other time” when his visitors felt disposed to call, they “should receive a very cordial welcome.” Later in the evening, Buchanan was serenaded by local musical groups.

Over the course of the next month, Buchanan eased into a retirement regimen. He took quiet walks, examined the conditions of his estate, added staff, and kept in touch as best he could with former Cabinet officers, both about what had been done during the secession crisis under his watch, and what was now unfolding in Charleston Harbor. By mid-April, federal forces at Charleston's Fort Sumter had been fired on and forced to capitulate, President Abraham Lincoln had called for 75,000 troops to put down the insurrection, and the Civil War was on.

For much of the next four years, the War—"Buchanan's war," some called it—would dominate the news and ultimately reshape the meaning of American nationhood. While on the sidelines, formally retired and unpopular in much of the North, the ex-president kept abreast of everything. In quiet ways, behind the scenes, he also attempted to influence the affairs of his beloved Democratic Party.

I do not believe, as Allan Nevins and other historian critics have alleged, that Buchanan was responsible for the coming of the Civil War. Clearly many causes over many years led to Fort Sumter. I do believe his political stewardship from 1857 to 1860 was unfortunate. His main failure lay in his Kansas policy, but it was more than that. He never imagined slavery as more than an abstraction, the essence of which could be readily managed by adhering to the Constitutional prescription of 1787. Buchanan seems never even to have considered that slavery was not just a political issue or legal construct but also a human problem that affected people viscerally, He was surprisingly uninterested in how white workers felt about slavery, and about "free labor" ideology—increasingly ascendant throughout the North--that rejected slavery's expansion. If

slavery was to be national, as the Dred Scott decision that Buchanan readily endorsed suggested it was, then what was the future of the white laboring class of the North? Buchanan never seems to have concerned himself with this problem, much less the well-being or future hopes of more than three million black people enslaved South of the Mason and Dixon line.

If we are to consider Buchanan's Civil War as something more than a blame game, however, it is necessary to reflect on another element of the story, namely, Buchanan's love of country. It is a generally neglected fact that James Buchanan was a patriot, and that he acted as a patriot during the Civil War.

From the firing on Fort Sumter to Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Buchanan hoped, rooted, and spoke for the preservation of the Union by force of arms, barring southerners' willingness to admit they had grievously erred in seceding.

As he wrote one week after the shelling began at Sumter, to former treasury secretary John A. Dix, "the present [Lincoln] administration had no alternative but to accept the war initiated by South Carolina or the Southern Confederacy. The North will sustain the administration almost to a man; and it ought to be sustained at all hazards."

Buchanan wrote these words in a moment of heightened alarm and emergency for the nation. But they were not mere expressions of solidarity conveniently forgotten at the next cycle of elections. Even a cursory examination of his correspondence during the Civil War will reveal many letters in which he said much the same thing. On April 26, in a letter to a friend, he called the firing on Sumter "an outrageous act," which would have provoked from him the same action that Lincoln had taken. In July, he observed to his friend, former assistant postmaster general Horatio King, that "The assault upon Fort

Sumter was the commencement of war by the Confederate states, and no alternative was left but to prosecute it with vigor on our part.” To accept Southern secession, he told a pro-southern friend, would be a “disgrace.” He avowed to this friend, Charles Manley, that the Union was in a “deadly struggle” with a “formidable assailant.” And in September, after the Union’s embarrassing defeat at Bull Run, he told his old friend, former Pennsylvania congressman George Leiper, “Every person who has conversed with me knows that I am in favor of sustaining the government in the vigorous prosecution of the war for the restoration of the Union.”

The phrase “every person who has conversed with me” is noteworthy. Buchanan was making no public speeches, and sending few public communications through the press, expressing any version of these views. The only significant exception was a letter he wrote to a committee of citizens of Chester and Lancaster Counties, in September 1861, appealing to them to support the war effort “& join the many thousands of brave & patriotic volunteers who are already in the field.” He added that it was their duty to “support the president with all the men & means at the command of the country. . . .” With that notable exception, insofar as he engaged in public discourse, it was neither to express opinions about secession and war or political candidates, but rather, to correct errors, distortions, and untruths that regularly cropped up in the press regarding his behavior during the secession crisis. On that subject Buchanan could be relentless, bent on vindicating his every decision and every action as president, sometimes in collision with the memories of his own Cabinet members.

Why did not Buchanan endorse Abraham Lincoln’s war policies that he agreed with, especially during the first year and a half when the issue was fundamentally that of

preserving the Union? Stephen Douglas had reached across the partisan divide to offer Lincoln his firm support after Fort Sumter was captured. There is no one answer to the question about Buchanan's reticence. Part of an answer lies in Buchanan's belief that the main job of ex-presidents was to tend to their own gardens and to avoid engaging in public debate. Or as he put it in a somewhat melancholic letter, he was living "on the rock at St. Helena"—a reference to Napoleon after Waterloo—and it was not seemly for him to be engaged in public controversies.

Buchanan, moreover, believed that anything he said would be misconstrued—for example, as an effort to make up for errors of judgment and dereliction of duty that were widely ascribed to him by the northern press, but which he believed were partisan slanders when they were not simply foolish falsehoods.

The most salient factor, I believe, was Buchanan's political identity, which trumped most everything else in his public life. Even on St. Helena, Buchanan's fierce loyalty to the Democratic Party and his version of the Democratic creed complemented his strong Unionism. His correspondence throughout the war years is, unsurprisingly, dominated by exchanges with political friends and associates, by expressions of commitment to Democratic principles, and by the conviction that if the country would embrace those principles—above all strict constitutional construction—peace and prosperity would germinate and flower. At one point deep into the war Buchanan even suggested that if the South would come back to the Union on the "old constitutional basis," meaning with slavery intact and protected, all would be forgiven, all would be well. He never seems to have considered the magnitude of the sacrifice of northern blood

and treasure during this war, nor grasped Lincoln's evolution in thought about the prospect that a "new birth of freedom" could justify that sacrifice.

Any account of Buchanan's Civil War must take cognizance of his age. Having lived seven decades at the time of his retirement from politics, Buchanan had earned his repose and the chance to enjoy a pleasant daily routine at Wheatland. Certainly he embraced his new status, spending hours each day perusing newspapers and public documents, while devoting other hours to correspondence, of which there was no end. There were guests to entertain, both relatives and friendly acquaintances, in a steady stream at Wheatland. By every account Buchanan treasured these guests. Many of his letters either begin or close by imploring former political associates and others he cared about to spend time at Wheatland with him, or regretting that his correspondents' ill-health or other circumstances prevented such visits. At Christmastime in particular Buchanan craved and enjoyed company. As he told John Blake in December 1863, Wheatland had been more "gay" than in previous months, thanks to the "good deal" of company he had enjoyed. A year later he begged Blake to "spend the Christmas holidays with us," while on another Christmas he told Blake that two nieces in the house "have made the house gay and agreeable."

Although Buchanan suffered periodically from intense bouts of what he called "gouty rheumatism," in truth, his health through the war was robust, and so were his spirits. He frequently mentioned to his friends that he would be truly happy only if peace broke out. But as for his personal situation, he had few complaints. An occasional injury through a misstep at home and more frequent bouts of rheumatism in his hands and legs

were the main clouds in his life. That, and dealing with pesky supplicants and nasty Republican journalists.

Through the Civil War years and beyond, Buchanan journeyed most summers to the waters at Bedford Springs for at least two weeks, as a restorative that seems to have worked. His letters often mentioned how good he felt for a man of his age, while at the same time he was aware that his time on earth was limited and that he was preparing for meeting his maker. Buchanan well knew that a man in his 70s not only had outlived most contemporaries but was living beyond his allotted Biblical three score and ten years. His response was to try to appreciate each new day, especially the arrival of spring and major holidays, and to assist people in need, and good causes, to the greatest extent possible.

To be sure, Buchanan sometimes had to disappoint those who sought his philanthropy. A representative of Dickinson College, Buchanan's alma mater, requested \$25,000 to endow a professorship. Buchanan replied that he didn't have that kind of money. Besides, he added, he had not enjoyed the kind of experience at Dickinson that would make him feel warmly about the school. Dickinson needed to find another donor.

Still, as Philip Klein has noted, Buchanan could be generous. He made gifts to many good causes, including local charities and Dickinson, Gettysburg, and Franklin & Marshall Colleges. He supported many nieces and nephews. At his own expense, he entertained hundreds of guests during his retirement years without the slightest suggestion that any of this was either unfair to him or a financial burden he did not appreciate.

In assessing Buchanan's Civil War, we must return again to Buchanan's patriotism, and compare his soft-edge on politics to the much more polemical approach of his predecessor in the White House, Franklin Pierce.

To my knowledge, Buchanan never uttered a cross word about his presidential successor as a person. Periodically he recalled his positive feelings about Lincoln in their brief encounter on inauguration day 1861. And he was deeply disturbed by Lincoln's assassination. Shortly after Lincoln died Buchanan suggested that the South had harmed itself through this awful act, as Lincoln was probably the best hope for quick and meaningful reconciliation between the sections. He did not, of course, extend this view to congressional Republicans like Ben Wade, Charles Sumner, or Thaddeus Stevens, all of whom he viewed as diabolical in their alleged lust for power in Washington and most particularly their insistence on advancing rights for African Americans.

If Buchanan was in key respects a hard-shell Democrat in his opposition to Republican domestic policies, his political engagement was less fervent and bitter than former President Pierce's. To be sure, both men regularly met and corresponded with fellow Democrats, offering counsel on election tactics and issues. Both prayed their party could regain control of the Congress and clip the Republicans' wings. Both disliked the idea of emancipation and any restriction on freedom of dissent during the war years. Both of them were convinced that the country would have been better off with the South in the Union, slavery protected by the Constitution and the executive office.

But differences of style and substance were equally noteworthy. Pierce penned bitter diatribes against Lincoln and the Republicans in 1862 and 1863. Buchanan spoke primarily of maintaining the Union. Pierce emphasized that blacks could never benefit

from freedom and charged that their freedom would harm whites. Buchanan regretted emancipation but made his peace with it. Buchanan saw Lincoln as a kind and intelligent leader, if on certain issues misguided. Pierce pronounced Lincoln a man of “narrow intelligence” and dangerous views.

A war fought to “abolish slavery by arms,” Pierce wrote to a political friend after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, was “truly treason, flagrant treason to this Constitution.” Lincoln, he said, was determined to eliminate states’ rights entirely and “destroy” the rights of eight million southern whites on behalf of a degraded, inferior race. “Is it too late,” he asked, “to stay the reckless march to barbarism to save the remnants of our honor as may warrant as to claim & deserve a place among the civilized people of the earth.”

Pierce’s bitterness spilled into public comment at a Democratic rally in Concord, New Hampshire, early July 1863. He attacked Lincoln and the war, calling the war “fearless, fruitless [and] fatal.” “How futile are all our efforts to maintain the Union by force of arms,” he proclaimed—uttering these words just as the telegraph was relaying news of George Gordon Meade’s triumph at Gettysburg. Pierce’s speech elicited a hostile response even among many Democrats, and he was for all intents and purposes a pariah even in his own community thereafter.

By contrast, James Buchanan kept his opinions more private, always emphasizing even to Peace Democrat friends that he backed the war to the end, so long as the South persisted in its folly.

Buchanan’s Civil War, in this context, was a better war than Franklin Pierce’s war. He did encounter an occasional taunt from local Republicans, zingers in the press,

and a few snubs at Bedford Springs from war supporters who did not realize he was on their side. But he never crossed an invisible line into curmudgeonly negativism, much less name-calling and polemics.

Buchanan cared enough about his reputation to revisit the controversies of his presidency, always concluding—no surprise—that he had done the right thing. Reluctant to publish his views during the war, he nonetheless engaged in a series of newspaper exchanges with General Winfield Scott, about who did what and when in provisioning of federal forts in South Carolina in the winter of 1860-61. This exchange incited and energized Buchanan. He spent much of 1864 and 1865 assembling documents and arranging them in a book-length apologia, Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion, published by D. Appleton and company in 1866. Convinced that history would treat him better than his contemporaries, Buchanan gave history a little help by telling his side of the story. A reader will need to look very hard indeed to find any instance in the book, or in Buchanan's private correspondence, where he felt he had erred. As he put it in a letter to Harriet Lane, the documents he had collected will "justify me in all I did and all I did not do since the election of Mr. Lincoln.

In sum, James Buchanan's Civil War found him at home, at his beloved Wheatland, tending his proverbial garden, following public affairs with real interest, and attempting to shape his historical reputation. He hated no man, not even Stephen Douglas or John Forney, both of whom he was sure had done him serious injury. He adored his home and his family. And he would meet his maker confident, as he told his friend, former Navy Secretary Isaac Toucey, that he had nothing to "repent." We should all be so lucky.

