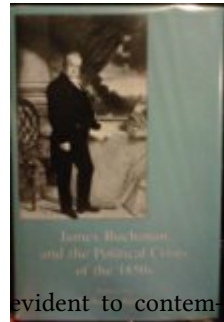


H-Net Reviews

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Michael J. Birkner, ed. *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*. Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 1996. 215 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945636-89-2.

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A group of Middle Period scholars met at Franklin and Marshall College in 1991 to commemorate James Buchanan's bicentenary. This book grew out of that conference and consists of the papers given and a post-paper panel reassessing the Buchanan presidency.

Michael J. Birkner introduces the essays with a brief biographical sketch of the fifteenth president. Born near Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1791, Buchanan graduated from Dickinson College in 1809 and went into law as a fast road to political advancement. His early political career as a Federalist lagged but advanced rapidly after he joined the Democratic party. During his forty-year career, Buchanan served as a U.S. representative, U.S. senator, minister to both Russia and Great Britain, secretary of state under James K. Polk, and, finally, as president. Something of a wheeler-dealer, Buchanan never gained enough esteem within his state party to control it, and he continually battled with George Mifflin Dallas for leadership. In national politics, Birkner agrees with Roy F. Nichols's statement that Buchanan was "essentially a 'scribe'—a person who could cultivate people effectively, ... but someone who never could or would take a constructive stand on a controversial question" (p. 25).

Two essays in the book do not deal with Buchanan directly, but rather focus on political events around him. Michael F. Holt re-evaluates the election of 1856, and Peter Knupfer assesses Buchanan's role in the election of 1860. Holt maintains that past historians, citing Millard Fillmore's mere 21.6 percent of the popular vote in 1856, have misjudged the importance of the American (Know-Nothing) party in that election. Looking at the election with historical hindsight, these historians have contended that the party was destined to be defeated once the majority in the northern branch joined the Re-

publicans. This outcome was not evident to contemporaries, writes Holt, because the Republicans had not yet emerged as a strong party (indeed, the name "Republican" was not used in a number of northern states); American leaders did not consider the split in the party as irreparable; and they regarded their stress on Unionism as more appealing to the mass electorate than the antislavery platform of the Republicans or the popular-sovereignty stand of the Democrats. American party hopes, Holt claims, were dashed by Bleeding Sumner and Bleeding Kansas more than by any failure on its part. Events in the territory and Preston Brooks's attack on Charles Sumner, along with the Republican propaganda that played upon those events, did more to sway northern voters than American party calls for Unionism and nativism.

According to Knupfer, Buchanan failed to appreciate the changes that had taken place in the North by 1860. The population there was determined to reach a solution on the slavery question, and the Republican platform proved particularly attractive to young, politically unattached voters. In addition, Buchanan's insistence that the Democratic platform protect southern interests guaranteed that the split between the Douglas Democrats and the rest of the party would not be healed. Out of touch with public opinion and damaged by both the Lecompton controversy and the Republican investigations of political corruption, Buchanan could be of little help to the Breckenridge candidacy he supported.

William Gienapp contrasts the Buchanan and Lincoln presidencies and finds them different in every way. Lincoln led his cabinet; Buchanan was led by his. Lincoln took little role in foreign affairs; Buchanan controlled his State Department. Lincoln confronted and compromised

with factions within his party; Buchanan tried to defeat them. Buchanan had no appeal for the general public whereas Lincoln reached out to the people and was unrivaled in his ability to influence popular opinion. In sum, Gienapp would probably agree with the conclusion that Lincoln was a leader and Buchanan was a follower.

Mark W. Summers focuses on Buchanan's relationship with the Democratic press and points out that Buchanan was so unreliable, especially when it came to patronage promises, that many editors broke ranks with the party by 1857. John W. Forney of Pennsylvania is a case in point. A longtime friend, Forney spent much time and his own money in making Buchanan president with the expectation that he would be offered the editorship of the *Washington Union*. When Buchanan encountered opposition to Forney's appointment, he withdrew the offer of the *Union* but promised to support Forney for the U.S. Senate, a commitment he also backed out of and replaced with the appointment of Forney as American consul in Liverpool. Forney was so angered by the president's duplicity that he established the *Philadelphia Press* and became one of Buchanan's major critics. Similarly, Buchanan reneged on a promise to support Kansas territorial governor Robert J. Walker's call for a public vote on the Lecompton Constitution, with the result that Walker joined antislavery forces in Kansas.

Of the five papers delivered at the conference, Robert E. May's is the most flattering to Buchanan. He was not the tool of the slavepower, May asserts, if one looks at his foreign policy. He did not endorse filibustering, and he supported the removal of William Walker from Nicaragua by naval commander Hiram Paulding.

Buchanan released Walker upon his return to the United States only because he had no grounds to hold him. Nor did Buchanan, as is often charged, remove Paulding from command. Appointed commander of the Home Squadron in 1855, Paulding reached the end of his duty tour in 1858, and his rotation had nothing to do with his capture of Walker. Nor was Buchanan's anti-filibustering attitude limited to the Walker case. In 1857, Lewis Cass, secretary of state, sent a circular to American diplomatic and customs officials requesting them to "'use all due diligence' and employ 'all legitimate means' to prevent any infractions of the nation's principal antifilibustering legislation" (p. 132).

Although the essays are well researched and well written, questions about the Buchanan presidency still remain. Historians need to know more about his expansionist ideas, his growing firmness to secession and the seizure of forts in the South, responses in the South to his policies, and reactions to his policies outside the United States. In my opinion, historians have tended to slight Buchanan's presidency because it was so overshadowed by Lincoln's and because he has been ranked near the bottom in every presidential poll. Still, books such as this one may enliven interest in Buchanan and his White House years, and answers to the questions I posed may be forthcoming.

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